Fate/zero
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4
「煉獄の炎」
虚淵玄
(ニトロプラス)

Fate/Zero

The Fires of Purgatory

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Interlude

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Sometime, somewhere

"Kerry, you do know where the name of this island comes from, right?"

Shirley asked while leisurely handling the creaking car’s wheel.

The boy called Kerry, sitting in the passenger’s seat, shook his head and squeezed out a "Not really" as if he was scared that the vehicle’s intense shaking would make him bite his tongue.

The pick-up truck they were both driving in was a vehicle so antique it may have come from the time when coaches were just running out of use. Moreover, the road they were driving on now was not a paved bitumen road but a dirt road. Even an ox-cart would have to slow down on these roads. Right now, they almost feel like they are sitting in a small boat floating on the sea during a storm.

Although this vehicle looked like a pile of junk about to go out of service, this is one of the only three or four precious vehicles on Arimago Island – Besides, as a fishing village with only about 300 families, people who need a car are uncommon enough on Arimago Island. The people troubled with living without a vehicle are probably just the family of the boy and Shirley, the maid who did the housework. In the far-removed house of the boy's family, far away from the fishing village, there were truly no other transportation facilities but this worn-out truck.

"Arimago... did it mean giant crab?"

Shirley nodded and answered the boy’s question.

"A long long time ago, this island was a place used to keep the offerings presented to a deity of the sea. However, there was a time when a girl didn't have anything to feed her sick mother, and had to steal the offerings of the deity. Then, that girl was punished with divine retribution, and was changed into the shape of a crab."

"It's a terrible story."

"After that, it was told that if you eat a crab caught on this island, it would cure any disease. The mother of the girl recovered from her long illness as well."

"That’s even worse. It is such an outrageous sea deity."

However, such folktales recorded in media such as tapestries aren't rare. If one were to look carefully, such tales can be found all over the world.

"Um, does the shrine where people sacrificed to this deity still exist?"

"It disappeared a long time ago. Besides, no one knows whether it really did exist. According to the myth, it seems to have been built right next to where Kerry's mansion is now."

“Then the girl who was turned into a crab actually made her way to the heart of this deep jungle so far away specifically to steal the offerings? It would have been much more convenient to just catch some fish at the beach instead.”

“That myth is the reason why people of the village wouldn't get close to your house. Legend says that's an ominous place, and you’ll get cursed if you go near it too often. I’ve been warned of it as well."

"But how!... then, what about me, who's living there?"

"It's because Kerry is a foreigner. But even then, don’t the people at the village see you as my little brother?"

Although the words ‘little brother’ didn’t completely make the boy feel relieved, compared to his father, who never stepped outside the house, Kerry does indeed need to help Shirley with the shopping every time. Therefore, they would basically ride in the truck to go into the village everyday.

It has been almost a year after he moved to this island. Any of the island’s inhabitants would warmly greet the boy when they saw him. Even the other boys of the village, who fought with him whenever they saw him beforehand, are also already making pranks on other people together with him.

Although he was in a strange land very far from his home land, the boy still likes this place called Arimago Island very much.

Although he felt extremely boring everyday during the first few weeks after he moved over, the dazzling southern sun and multi-colored sparkling waves of the southern ocean had gradually captured Kerry’s heart.

However, for his father, who never approached anyone and didn’t step out of the house at all, it would be hard to feel that there is anything delightful at all.

"If father would communicate more with the people at the village, he would surely be a bit different..."

"Mmm, who knows..."

While skilfully handling the steering wheel to dodge large rocks sticking out of the road, Shirley gave a bitter smile.

"Father Simon never liked your father’s actions, and had often lectured me with things like I’d sooner or later be ensnared by the devil if I go work in that house again."

"… I see."

The boy couldn’t help but feel a little down when knew that Father Simon, who always seemed to be so gentle, would judge his father in such a way behind his back. But it can't be helped. Rather, he should feel relieved that those comments were only to such an extent. Father Simon would surely expel both father and son out of this small island if he really knew about everything the boy's father did.

Shirley tapped her lower back, and motioned for Kerry to look at a silver short sword on her belt.

"Look at this knife. Father Simon forced it onto me and wants me never to part with it. He said it’s a very useful talisman."

"… Isn’t this the knife you always use to peel fruits?"

"Mmm, that's because this knife is very sharp and is easy to use. It must be something very precious."

Shirley continued to speak in a calm tone. Different from the boy, she appeared to not feel anything gloomy with this topic.

"Aren’t you afraid, Shirley? Aren’t you afraid of my father?"

Although the boy was a bit hesitant, he asked this question at the end. Shirley nodded decisively.

"I understand your father isn't a normal person, and based on his behaviors it's not unreasonable for the villagers to be guarded towards him. However, since he’s doing those kinds of researches, it can't be helped that he left the city and came to such a remote island to live a hermit’s life. But this shows your father really is an impressive person."

The boy suddenly noticed that for some reason, Shirley would suddenly become mature and sensible whenever they talked about his father. She was only a girl 4 years his elder; she definitely isn’t as mature as adults.

"If you take any one of his knowledge and discoveries, it would be an immense discovery that can change everything for this world. Of course, anyone would become scared if they knew about such things, and it can't be helped for it to be held in secret... but as for me, I really do believe such powers can help this world greatly. I've always firmly believed in that."

"... Can such things, really be possible?"

"He may have given it up already. But Kerry, if it were you, I believe it would definitely be successful!"

Shirley said so with a serious expression on her face. Instead, the boy said disappointedly.

"What do you mean? Aren't you, Shirley, father's favorite pupil? Wouldn't it be Shirley who keeps it up if it comes to it?"

Shirley, who went often to his house, didn't only do domestic chores such as tidying the house; she also helped his father in his work as an assistant. His father once said that this girl named Shirley possesses exceptional intelligence and talents, and is really a waste to leave her on this lone island. It says something about Shirley's talents if his father, who always obeyed the creed of secrecy, trusts a female stranger to such a degree.

But Shirley herself laughed loudly and shook her head.

"I'm not any kind of a pupil. At the most I'm only an assistant, someone who does the odd jobs and give a hand. Therefore, I don't know anything about the important parts.

But Kerry, you're different from me. You will definitely succeed your father's business. The researches your father is doing now will need to be kept up by you one day. Are you prepared for it? Although it is a bit to early for you to talk about such things."

"..."

Shirley said all that earnestly, like a real big sister worrying about her little brother. For one moment, the boy was caught with the complicated sentiments in his heart and couldn't speak.

He didn't have any memories about his mother, who passed away right after he was born. For the boy, his so-called family only consisted of his father. Although his

father was eccentric and very strict, he was a very gentle and a great father. He was the person the boy respected and loved the most in the entire world.

Therefore, at the beginning, the boy's heart was in upheaval when he discovered that the father, whom he admired the most, favored an assistant more than his own son. There was a time when he even felt enmity for Shirley. But Shirley's cheerful temperament and gentle attitude untied the knot in his heart, and that time didn't last long.

It was almost as if there was a new member in his family. Shirley respected the boy's father as if he was her own father, and looked after the boy like her real little brother. For the boy, who didn't have female relatives, the words 'older sister' far surpassed the meaning the words originally possessed.

No... Maybe it wasn't so exaggerated at first, but recently such strange feelings had occurred in the boy's chest.

He knew well Shirley's gentleness, cheerfulness, and virtue. But moreover, even her unconscious gestures – such as her current profile as she handled the steering wheel while humming – also appear to be so beautiful. Why?

"Kerry, what kind of a man would you like to become? And if you succeeded your father's work, how would you like to use it?"

"... eh?"

The absentminded boy was suddenly dragged back into reality by Shirley's question.

"It's the power to change the world. Someday you are gonna obtain it."

"..."

His father's inheritance. If would be a lie to say that he never thought about that. The boy completely understands its value and its significance.

Let alone its use.

But the boy looked rather hesitant to put it in words himself, particularly in front of Shirley. He didn't want others to tell him that his dream is naive, above all from Shirley.

"... That's, a secret."

"Mmm?"

Shirley laughed knowingly, then kept asking.

"Then, I'll use my own eyes to confirm what Kerry wants to do when he grows up. Until I get the answer, I'll always be beside you. How's that?"

"... Do as you like."

As if feeling somewhat ashamed, the boy turned his eyes away.

But even so, the smile of the girl who is almost like his older sister was still far too dazzling for the boy.

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Skin white as wax.

The blue-black veins that popped up tore her looks into shards.

An expression, full with near-death anguish, filled her face.

She is about to die – that was obvious.

Although she's about to die, she was still writhing.

If that was the expression of a human, then this human will soon become something inhuman – the boy's heart understood this clearly.

The night outside. Of course, there are no street lights on this island. Even so, the chilly white light that came from the bright and pure moon outside silently illuminated the scene of this tragedy through the window.

This is a henhouse on the edge of the village. While searching for Shirley, who suddenly disappeared for no reason, the boy walked through every inch of the village during the day. The boy didn't give up and kept searching till night. Then he came upon here.

The leftover carcasses of the chickens eaten, and the "Dead" that kept shivering and crying deep inside the henhouse.

Kill me –

The "Dead" that had the same face as the woman he liked the most begged him while sobbing.

Then, the silver short sword that was thrown near his feet reflected back a cold and pale light in the moonlight.

Terror –

I can't do it myself –

Therefore, please. Kill me –

While there's still time –

"Such a thing..."

Shaking his head, the boy drew back.

I cannot do.

No matter what shape you turn into, Shirley is Shirley. We promised to be together forever. She's a most important family – no, she even more important than family.

Please –

Shirley panted painfully. Gradually her sounds became maddening. Together with sorrowful sobbing, the girl let out a panting like a hungry beast.

It's already – over – before I completely lose control of myself – quick –

Shirley's body started to tremble uncontrollably as if she got malaria, then she suddenly opened her mouth and bit into her wrist.

Spurt...

Spurt... the sound of blood splashing out entered the boy's eardrums.

Please –

The persistent sound of begging drowned out the boy's tragic wails. The boy ran out of the henhouse.

What gave the boy more terror than the Shirley in front of him – was the light that the short sword emanated beside his feet.

He doesn't know what actually happened, and he doesn't want to understand.

Now, all that the boy prayed for is to have someone to save them.

The boy firmly believed that there must be someone who can release them from this nightmarish terror.

Shirley will surely be saved. Someone surely is going to save them.

The boy kept repeating this to himself.

It takes about 5 minutes to get to Father Simon's church if he runs as fast as he can.

The boy ran for his life as he cried. Be it the pain in his feet or the anguish in his chest, he could no longer feel any of them.

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Natalia Kaminski. The woman said that’s her name.

This woman wore an inky black long coat very inappropriate for a tropical night, but there was no sign of her sweating. Rather than thinking of her pale countenance as cold and cruel, it was better described as expressionless. It would even make others doubt whether there was actually blood flowing within her, and whether she actually has body heat like normal people.

That was the appearance of the savior who saved the boy out of the ravaging pandemonium.

"Alright, kid. It's about time for you to answer a few questions for me."

With his back turned to the woman's cold voice, the boy only stared transfixed at the distant fishing village that was burning to the ground.

The village that was so peaceful till just yesterday, the village that was slumbering beneath the silent moonlight only a few hours ago, was actually burning with endless flames. He still couldn’t believe the scene before his eyes even if he was standing on top of the cliffs opposite the town and witnessed it himself; he only thought all this was a nightmare.

He would never see those familiar, gentle faces in the village again – he couldn’t believe it no matter what.

"… What exactly, happened?"

The boy asked with a dry voice. Natalia snorted.

"I was the one who asked first. Boy, isn't it time to get back to your senses?"

"..."

The boy suddenly turned his head around. Even if he owes her his life, it was really very irritating for her to ignore other's feelings, not answer his questions, and on the contrary went on and on with her own questions.

After an obstinate silence, Natalia seemed to have grasped his thoughts. Then, she let out a helpless sigh, and gave a brief explanation.

"Now, there are two groups that caused such a tragedy in that village. One group is the Executors for the so-called Holy Church. They are completely different from the nice priests you know. They are cruel guys who believe that all those who betrayed God needs to be killed. Of course, they would naturally mercilessly eliminate something like a vampire if they see it. If they don't have the time to check one by one who among the people had their blood sucked, they would completely destroy all suspects. In other words, these guys don't have much time right now.

The other group is called the Association. This is a bit difficult to explain – basically they're a group who wants to solely possess fantastic thing such as vampires. Naturally, in order to have sole possession, they would kill anybody else who knew about the relevant details. There's no point in not do things very thoroughly in order to destroy evidence and hide the truth.

Because of this, boy, you've got fine luck. You're probably the only inhabitant of this island right now who managed to survive through the purge those people delivered."

The boy accepted this fact even easier than Natalia had expected. It was as if the boy had discerned the reason those dangerous men would come to Arimago Island a long time ago.

The boy rushed to Father Simon to seek help, and the priest who received this request contacted some other people. Some people outside the island must have received this intelligence while the priest delivered such information.

Leaving the sequence of events aside, at least the beginning of this tragedy was inextricably linked to himself.

If the boy had listened to Shirley's supplication and took the courage to plunge the silver white short sword into the chest of the girl he loved the most, then this present tragedy would not have happened.

If he had done that, then even if he would become a hollow shell without a soul from now on or even if he could no longer doze off in the night – these many lives won't have been lost.

For the boy, it was the same as if he had set that memorable place on fire himself.

"... Then, which side are you on?"

"I'm like a salesman for the Association. My job is to seek out secrets they are interested in, protect this secret from being known by anyone else and pass it into their hands. Of course, it needs to be sold to them before such a huge incident happens. It can't be sold now."

Natalia shrugged her shoulders. Perhaps she had already become accustomed to such scenes. It was as if the woman in black emanated the smell of death from her entire body.

"Alright, boy, let's get back to the previous question. It's about time for you to answer my question.

The so-called Sealing Designation – do you know what that means? Also, where is the evil magus, who's the culprit of this vampire incident, hiding on this island? Do you know of it?"

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Although those words sounded too deep for this boy, in truth it hit the bull's eye of this problem in some way.

Kerry is not the boy's real name.

The name of the boy, who was born in a foreign, remote country, was very hard to pronounce for the people here. At the very beginning it was Shirley who abbreviated his name into Kerry, and then the villagers all called him Kerry by habit. The boy also felt that, instead of being called a strange name such as 'Keritougu', 'Kerry' sounded much friendlier.

The boy's real name is – Kiritsugu.

The son of the magus who has been given a Sealing Designation, Emiya Norikata.

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In the deep night, Kiritsugu returned to the wooden villa in the depths of the jungle, and saw his father receiving him with a worried expression.

"Ahh, Kiritsugu. Are you alright? Thank goodness…"

His father embraced him. It has been many years since he felt his father's broad shoulders. It was a rare moment for his strong father to express his true feelings like that.

After releasing Kiritsugu from his arms, his father's expression suddenly turned severe and said.

"I told you not to step out of the barrier of the forest today no matter what. Why did you disobey me?"

"... Because I was worried about Shirley…"

His father suddenly turned his eyes aside when he heard the girl's name. Just that small gesture could completely confirm one fact.

"Dad, did you know what changes happened to her body? Is that why you didn't allow me to go outside?"

"… About that girl, it's really a pity. Although I told her the reagent was very dangerous and to never touch it, it seems she still didn't win over her own curiosity."

Although his father's tone was filled with bitterness, there was no regret or shame in it. It was as if he was telling off a boy who broke a flower vase with only blame and anger in his tone.

"... Dad, why would you investigate the Dead Apostles?"

"Of course that's not my true intention. However, being the research of us, the Emiya family, we should seek it no matter how far it seems. I have to come up with a solution for aging, at least before your generation. The flesh, shackled with the destiny of death, is really too far away from the 'root'."

Shirley's pitiful sight that he saw under the light of the moon once again appeared before Kiritsugu.

"Dad... would you eventually turn me into that shape too?"

"Nonsense. Someone who cannot control the vampiric urges and becomes a Dead Apostle is a failure... I told Shirley this a long time ago. Looks like the results of this

experiment isn’t as good as I thought it’d be. I’d have to start from the basics and modify my theories again."

"... I see."

Kiritsugu nodded and said.

His father seemed to be intent in continuing. There’s no need to pay attention to sacrifices of this degree. He still needs to keep repeating it until he gets a satisfactory result.

"Kiritsugu, we’ll talk about this later. Now our top priority is to hurry and escape – I'm afraid there’s no longer time to pack. Soon those guys from the Association would see through the barrier in this dense forest. We need to leave soon."

Looks like his father made the preparations to leave a long time ago. There were already two large suitcases packed and sitting in the middle of the room. The reason he had delayed till now – was probably waiting for his own child to return.

"... Are we escaping? Right now?"

"I knew a long time ago this day would come, so I prepared a motor boat on the southern coast beforehand. You can never be too prepared.”

His father took one suitcase in each of his hands, turned around and walked towards the porch – of course, at this moment he was not guarded at all.

Then, Kiritsugu took the pistol Natalia gave to him from his trouser pocket.

It was a .32 caliber pistol. If it was fired from point-blank range, even a child can easily hit the target. The woman in black assured him of that. After that, it'd be all Kiritsugu's concern.

While aiming the gun at his father's defenseless back, the scene of village that was burned to the ground and Shirley’s final tragic expression swelled up within the boy’s heart – also, all the memories he had after living with his father for ten years, and the gentle sentiments that was hidden beneath his father’s stoic look.

His father loves him, and is full of expectations of him. He also loves his father deeply, and is proud of him.

Endless feeling tangled up and Kiritsugu wanted to close his eyes. However, contrary to his sentiments, Kiritsugu opened his eyes and aimed, then swiftly pressed the trigger.

Bam – it was an unexpected, dry and crisp sound.

His father, shot from the back of the neck, fell forward. Then Kiritsugu walked up and continued to fire towards the back of his head twice. Then he stopped, and continued to give two more shots to his back.

He couldn't believe it. Even Kiritsugu himself was afraid of his own coldness.

He wavered to the end. Certainly there was struggle in his heart. However, his hand moved as if everything was pre-established and out of his control. His body completely disregarded the thoughts in his heart, and only mechanically carried out things that 'had to be done'.

This behavior may be regarded as a talent – this thought only flicked past his heart briefly. After that, Kiritsugu once again sank into emptiness, with no sense of accomplishment.

The wooden floor gradually became stained red with blood. Father wasn't there anymore. What lay there was nothing but a corpse. This thing was the culprit. This thing rubbed away everything he had, killed everyone on the island, and burnt the village to the ground.

Shirley said he is an amazing person, someone with the power to change the world. Kiritsugu thought so as well once upon a time.

What did the two youngsters understand about the way of magecraft? And what did they expect of magi?

At the beginning, Kiritsugu didn't realize he was crying. Even he didn’t know whether his current feelings were sadness or regret. All he felt was an emptiness as if he was drained to the core.

The gun in his right hand was very heavy, almost too heavy to lift up. However, he couldn't throw it away. His fingers froze on the trigger and couldn’t move.

Kiritsugu even risked the danger of accidentally firing and swung his right hand crazily just to try to throw the gun away. But it was all useless; his fingers were holding the gun tightly as if they were glued to it.

At that moment, somebody suddenly grabbed his wrist, and then easily took the gun away from his hand. Only then did Kiritsugu realize Natalia had already appeared beside him.

"C’mon, the bounded field here isn’t as exaggerated as you said. I got in easily."

Natalia said with a rather scolding tone.

"... Are you angry?"

"You think? I've never given this thing for kids to play with."

Natalia glanced at the gun she took from Kiritsugu, then she put it back into her pocket after locking the safety again.

"However, it was up to your luck to see if you can make it on time."

In fact, if all that didn't happen just now, Emiya Norikata would surely have escaped safely and went into hiding again, then restarted his research on the Dead Apostles at some other unknown place. Maybe the tragedy triggered on this island would happen once again.

This isn't a problem than can be solved by luck. This is something that has to be stopped.

"This man, had a reason that he has to be killed – I have no other choice."

"I even encouraged a child to kill his own father; I really am a very bad person."

Natalia said, discouraged. Hearing this, Kiritsugu smiled with traces of tears still on his face.

"... You, are a good person."

Natalia looked, stunned, at Kiritsugu's smile. Then she sighed and heaved the corpse of Emiya Norikata onto her shoulder.

"I'll take you out of the island. You need to decide what comes afterwards yourself – is there anything you'd like to take with you?"

"Nothing at all."

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Then… Kiritsugu spent the following few years beside Natalia Kaminski.

Naturally, Natalia didn't look after him like an orphan or her adopted child, but ordered Kiritsugu around as an assistant or servant. However, this was just what Kiritsugu desired.

He studied Natalia's skills and trained his own abilities at the same time in order to walk the same path as Natalia – to become a 'hunter'. This is the unchangeable path that Kiritsugu chose for his life.

The tragedy at Arimago Island was not a rare event. Such tragedies are repeated over and over again like daily occurrences in the shadowy places of the world.

The magi who are willing to bring ill omen into the mortal world in order to seek the knowledge that they search for and the two large organizations that used any methods necessary to hide these facts; the battle surrounding these mysterious events kept occurring at obscure places. Precisely because of this, there's money to be made for Natalia.

Eliminating magi such as Emiya Norikata is really too far from the ideal of preventing such tragedies from happening again – if could almost be said that Emiya Norikata was only one drop of water in the vast ocean, an existence that could almost be afforded to be completely ignored.

His action on that day, killing his father by his own hands; if he was to make that event meaningful and worthy...

Then that means all heretic magi like his father must be killed. Only then can he truly prevent tragedies from occurring again.

Sealing Designation Enforcers.

Hound dogs that hunt demons that have surpassed ordinary sense. The boy chose this thorny road of Shuras without a moment's hesitation.

Natalia does not belong to an organization, and was only a freelancer who hunted with bounty as her goal. Her targets are those Sealing Designated magi who possess precious research results, but have left the Magi's Association and conducted secret researches. Different from the Holy Church that acted in the name of judging all heretics and killed everyone, the Magi's Association had ensuring the safety of the research results as its priority.

And what's the most precious of all are the Magic Crests carved on the magi's flesh. Magic Crests that are created through generations of research can produce even greater powers when it is passed onto the successor, especially for magi families.

Through negotiations Natalia had made with the Association, a section of the Magic Crests gathered from Emiya Norikata's body was allowed to be inherited by his son Emiya Kiritsugu. Although the important parts were confiscated by the Association and only a 'fragment' of barely half the original amount was allowed for Emiya Kiritsugu to inherit, it was enough for Kiritsugu to use his abilities as a magus. Besides, Kiritsugu didn't have the intention of following his father's dying wish and continuing magecraft research to begin with.

For Kiritsugu, magecraft isn't his life-long career, but just a tool used to achieve his goals. Moreover, this tool was only one of the many 'tools' that the boy learnt from the huntress.

Tracking, assassination, the usage of various weapons – there can't be only one 'fang' for a hound. All sorts of knowledge and skills are necessary for him to master in order to be able to catch up to the pray under all situations and conditions and bring it down.

In a sense, the history of human beings is a history of killing. Humans spent an endless amount of time and intelligence to research the skill of 'killing people' in order to hunt down the 'two-legged beasts' that looked the same as themselves. Kiritsugu had made his own body master all these.

The years covered in blood and gunpowder passed by flying.

Emiya Kiritsugu, who experienced the trials of too many violent battles during a time as sensitive as adolescence, no longer has any youthful innocence on his face. As an oriental person of unknown age, his three different false passports all recorded him as an adult and they hadn't been questioned a single time.

However, judging only from his appearance, although his figure isn't very tall and his moustache is sparse, his grim and cold look is definitely not something that a teenage boy should have.

One day –

Even when he knew that his teacher and friend – Natalia – faced the worst danger in her life, Kiritsugu still didn't show any emotional wavering and devotedly completed his duty.

No matter how anxious or wavering his heart is, there was not a single way to help Natalia. That's because her battlefield is inside a giant commercial airliner more than 3000 feet above in the sky.

It started with the chase for the magus known as the "Demonic Bees User", Od Volsack.

It was said that this magus successfully created Dead Apostles and can manipulate the Demonic Bees under his control to use poisonous stings to increase the amount of Ghouls under his power; a very dangerous man indeed. Moreover, he had changed his name and face and pretended to be an ordinary person, with no information about him at all. However, four days ago, there was information that he was taking Flight A300 from Paris to New York. In the situation of being completely ignorant of the person's appearance and name, Natalia accepted this gruelling task of finding the target among the plane's 287 passengers and 'erase' him.

As her partner, Kiritsugu didn't board the plane, but instead went ahead to New York to investigate Volsack's fake identity. The teacher and student communicated using radio and calmly and confidently locked down the location of the prey in that sealed space 3000 feet above the sky.

Approximately three hours after the takeoff – the assassination was achieved unexpectedly smoothly. However, that was the beginning of the tragedy.

The Ghoul Bees that Volsack brought into the plane through deceiving customs caused a fatal disturbance after the death of their master. The Ghoul Bees that Natalia didn't destroy on time raided towards the passengers one by one, and the cabin of the giant commercial airliner turned into a living hell ravaged by Ghouls in the blink of an eye.

Faced with a sealed area with nowhere to escape and Ghouls that manipulated without end, even someone as strong as Natalia felt an endless despair. Faced with this worsening situation, Kiritsugu could do nothing and can only wait for the radio communication. He must not let go of any chance of proving that Natalia was still alive.

The basic rule that Natalia had instructed Kiritsugu over and over again is – 'no matter what method you use, you must ensure your own survival'. Since she has such a creed, Kiritsugu firmly believed that experienced huntress can definitely make it out this time too. After two hours, the radio was still silent.

Finally, when the light of the stars in the night sky was covered by the cyan shade of dawn, the tired voice of a woman was transmitted with static.

“… Can you hear me? Kid… you aren’t asleep, right?”

“Loud and clear, Natalia. We’re both at that most sleepy time right before dawn, after staying awake for the entire night.”

“Of course. If you dared to go back and sleep last night I’ll definitely kill you afterwards… well, there’s some good news and some bad news. Which one do you want to listen to first?”

Natalia laughed briefly and said so.

“Didn’t we promise to start with the good news?”

“Ok. Then it’s good news first. First of all, I’m alive. The plane is without damage as well. I’ve just ensured the safety of the cockpit; both the captain and the co-pilot have already set the flying perimeters before their death. Even I can manage to simply drive it. Apparently the controls are the same as a Cessna.”

“Did you communicate with the control tower?”

“Got them. At the beginning they thought it was a prank, but now they’re directing me well.”

“… Then, the bad news?”

“Mm – I was the only one who didn’t get bitten. All passengers and crew, all 300 of them, perished and became Ghouls. The other side of the cockpit, divided only by a panel, already became a flying city of the dead. Don’t be surprised now.”

“…”

That’s the worst situation Kiritsugu had thought of.

“In that condition, will you… come back alive?”

“Ahh, this door is pretty rigid. Although it’s a bit wobbly now, there’s no worry about it being broken – Instead, the landing makes me more insecure. Can this giant thing really land safely?”

“… If it’s you, then you’ll surely manage.”

“Was that you encouraging me? I’m glad to hear.”

After a bitter laugh, Natalia gave a powerless sigh.

“There are still 50 minutes before arriving at the airport. It’s too early to pray – kid, chat with me for a while.”

“… I don’t mind.”

So they started a random conversation. First, they began with those two hours when communication ceased. Then they listed the dead Volsack’s many evil deeds in detail. Finally, the two of them naturally remembered the magi and Dead Apostles that they had destroyed, and those Shura’s fields that the two had faced together.

Natalia, who was usually quiet, became talkative for some reason today. The low roar of the Ghouls coming in from the cabin intertwined with the sound of them repeatedly hitting the cockpit’s door. Chatting is the single best choice to distract one’s attention from that.

“– When you first told me you want to enter this career path, I was having a real headache for a long time. Moreover, you didn’t want to change your idea no matter how much I persuaded you.”

“Was I such an unpromising disciple?”

“No… it’s because you have too much promise, too much potential.”

Natalie said with a bitter laugh.

“… What does that mean?”

“Because you can make your actions completely removed from your emotions – regular hit men can only obtain it after many years of trials. However, you had that since you were born. What a surprising talent.”

“…”

“But hey, it’s not necessarily correct to choose your life’s path based on talent and abilities alone. A person’s belief and feelings come before talents; that is the key to decide a person’s life. If that doesn’t exist, a person can’t be regarded as a person anymore. If they consider ‘What needs to be done’ before considering ‘What I want to do’ and only acted according to those rules… then they are not people but are only regarded as machines, far removed from the life of a human.”

The words of the teacher who had watched him growing up glided past the boy’s heart like cold frost.

“I, well… I had thought you are a very cold person.”

“What’s that after all this time? Isn’t that the truth? Was I ever gentle towards you?”

“No. You always were strict, absolutely merciless.”

“… Usually, disciplining a boy is the role of the father.”

On the opposite end of the radio, Natalia was silent for a while, then continued after sighing helplessly.

“However, I carry a certain degree of responsibility for causing you not to have the education from a father. Well, how to say it… it’s not that there was a way to push it off me.”

I can only teach you some survival skills; I’m useless for everything else – Natalia added that as if mocking herself.

“… You wanted to be my father?”

“Don’t mix up men with women, impertinent. At least you should call me mother.”

“… Right. Sorry.”

Although Kiritsugu’s answering tone was very even, his expression looked very shocked.

Radio can’t display the other person’s face and obviously can’t see their expressions either. Therefore, Natalia could not know of Kiritsugu’s current feelings.

“… For a long time, I experienced the blood and stench on my own. I’ve almost forgotten the fact that I am all alone.

That’s why, well… Haha. It’s almost funny. As if we are family.”

“Me too –”

What’s the meaning of saying these things now? Kiritsugu asked himself in his heart while he continued to speak.

“– I, have also regarded you as if you’re my mother. I feel that I’m not alone, and I was happy.”

“… Hey there Kiritsugu. So that we don’t feel too awkward when we meet next time, let’s stop talking about this topic.”

Natalia’s current bewildered expression could vaguely be discerned in her words. It seems she was still unaccustomed to things like ‘embarrassment’.

“Ahh, the situation got worse. I’m landing in 20 minutes. I don’t want to commit some fatal mistake at such an important time just because I remembered something funny.”

“… Sorry.”

Kiritsugu apologized.

Natalia didn’t need to choose to do an emergency landing.

She also wasn’t going to meet Kiritsugu again.

Only Kiritsugu knew that.

There is no possibility of Natalia surviving before all these Ghouls are completely destroyed. The only way to deal with this airliner full of Ghouls is to make it plunge into the Atlantic Ocean. The operation to eliminate the “Demonic Bee User” is achieved at the cost of the lives of all the passengers and crew and Natalia Kaminski – Kiritsugu was already prepared for this outcome.

But Kiritsugu knew his teacher would definitely demonstrate her amazing abilities at the last moment. Natalia, who held on to the creed of ‘must survive no matter what’, may prevent the body of the plane from crushing in order to save her own life. Kiritsugu must consider this as well – that would be the unpredictable worst result.

Natalia, who prioritizes her life above all else, must choose this outcome without hesitation after weighing out the risks.

Land the airliner filled with 300 Ghouls at the airport and release these hungry dead – she would definitely choose this method if there were no other choices. Kiritsugu had already made the preparations to deal with this 10000-to-1 possibility precisely because Kiritsugu knew her too well.

In order to prevent the disaster from expanding further, the A300 must not be allowed to land.

That is the unswayable truth regardless of Natalia’s welfare.

Kiritsugu had been around almost half of New York an hour ago and finally brought a military surface-to-air portable missile launcher from the black market.

Right now, Kiritsugu was standing in a motor boat floating on the sea, waiting for Natalia’s plane to appear in his sight. The giant airline needs to circle a while before landing at the New York International Airport; Kiritsugu’s current position can roughly get the plane into the range of his missile.

While he was purchasing the weapon and choosing the spot to fire, Kiritsugu once again doubted the construction of his own mentality.

Viewing from the perspective of avoiding a larger tragedy, it is a correct response for him to calmly face Natalia's death.

However, what is he who gives up on the final 'miracle' that would make the woman he loves survive, and instead kill her with his own hands?

It would be good if everything was only an assumption, but right now Emiya Kiritsugu was facing the cruel truth. Soon, he would erase Natalia by his own hands. Now, A300 had appeared at the sky at the break of dawn with sparkling silver wings.

"… Perhaps I, have really lost it."

Natalia still believed without a doubt that Kiritsugu, on the other side of the radio, was in a hotel in New York, so she said leisurely with no caution.

"Maybe I would never end up saying those things if such a big mistake didn't occur. It seems my time is up, too. Should I be retiring…"

"– If you retire, then what do you plan on doing after?"

Kiritsugu still faked an even voice. Meanwhile, his two hands have started to set the missile launcher onto his shoulder, and aimed the missile at the airliner.

"If I lose my job… haha, then I may really become your mother."

Even with his eyes running full of tears, he was still able to accurately decide the distance to the target… it was within 1500 meters. A certain hit.

"You… really are my family."

Kiritsugu said softly, then he released the missile.

In the few seconds that the missile had to be manually directed and Kiritsugu had to keep the aim on the airliner that Natalia was on, all his memories about her resurfaced in Kiritsugu's mind.

But that torture did not last long. Soon the missile locked onto the heat radiation the giant commercial airliner emitted out. The missile left Kiritsugu's control, and rushed mercilessly towards the target like a hungry shark.

The missile hit squarely on the gas tank beneath the wings; Kiritsugu watched the plane tilt and fall downwards.

The collapse afterwards was like a sand picture blown apart by a stormy wind – the masses of iron that lost its thrust was dismembered like rotten wood, and became a cloud of fine dust that silently fell onto the surface of the sea. The carcass of the plane that fell in the rising morning glow danced like confetti at a gala.

The first sliver of the dawn's light that shone out from the other side of the horizon didn't touch Natalia's face even at the end. Basked in the morning sun all alone, Emiya Kiritsugu started crying soundlessly.

Once again, he had saved a crowd of unknown faces. Without anyone knowing.

Did you see that, Shirley?

I have killed again this time. Killed as when I killed my father. I would never make the same mistake that I made with you back then. I, wanted to save more people…

If Kiritsugu's actions and intentions were known by others, would they thank Kiritsugu? Would the passengers at the airport who were spared of death under the threat of the Ghouls praise Kiritsugu as a hero?

"Don't kid me…Don't kid me! Bastard!"

Grasping tightly the missile launcher that was starting to wear off the remaining heat, Kiritsugu roared towards the brightening sky.

He didn't want prestige or gratitude. He just wanted to see Natalia's face once again. He just wanted to call her "Mom" face to face.

This isn't the conclusion he wanted. This is only the correct decision, with no other choice and no space for dispute. Kiritsugu's decision was 'correct'. He erased the person who must die and saved those with no reason to die. If this isn't 'justice', then what would it be?

It can't come back anymore. He remembered that distant face so long ago that asked him "What kind of a man would you like to become?" with a gentle look under the blinding morning sun.

At that time, Kiritsugu should have answered – If he has the power to freely change the world, if miracles would dwell in his hands; 'I want to be a hero of justice!'.

The Kiritsugu back then still didn't know what this scale named 'justice' would rob away, and what it would bring him.

‘Justice’ took away his father, and now it also took his mother. All it left was the sensation of blood in his hands. Even his right to remember them was also stripped away.

The people he loved. Their voices, their faces; none of them can come back. Instead, they will appear again and again in Kiritsugu’s nightmares. They would probably never forgive Kiritsugu, who took their lives away with his own hands.

That is the choice of ’justice’. The price of pursuing his ideal.

Now, Kiritsugu can no longer turn back. What he seeks will disappear with even a single moment of hesitation or uncertainty. If so, then all the prices he had paid, and all the sacrifices, would become worthless.

Surely he would follow the ideal in his heart and reach for its fulfilment while he cursed and hated at the same time?

Kiritsugu vowed silently in his heart.

He will accept that curse. He will accept this anger. At the same time, he prays that some day he will drain all his tears and reach that far distant and serene utopia.

If the cruelty that his hands carry is the limit for humans.

Then let he himself wipe away all the tears in the world.

That was the last day of Kiritsugu’s youth –

As he determinedly stepped towards that thorny and uneven path.

ACT13

Act 13

-48:11:28

It was not yet morning. Kotomine Kirei was already waiting at the door of the Tōsaka mansion.

He had not come to this place since summoning Archer ten days ago. This was the Western-style mansion he had spent his time in as an apprentice magus three years ago, the one place in Fuyuki he felt closer to than even the church.

"Welcome, Kirei. I've been waiting for you."

Though a guest had arrived at an unusual hour, Tōsaka Tokiomi appeared quickly at the door after hearing the doorbell. Perhaps he had not slept at all since leaving the Fuyuki Church the previous night. Kirei bowed deeply to Tokiomi in the manner of a disciple to his master.

"There are some things I wish to tell you before I leave Fuyuki, and then I must bid you farewell."

"So it has come to this... and on such short notice. To part with you in such a manner—I have my regrets as well."

Tokiomi spoke these words, but there was no trace of guilt on his face. That was to be expected. Tokiomi understood that Kotomine Kirei was but a pawn the Tōsaka family had borrowed from the Holy Church.

To Kirei, the Heaven's Feel would yield no reward, being a mandatory task assigned by unseen powers from above. Kirei's parting from Tokiomi was not a rejection or a betrayal, but a release from duty. Coming to say farewell was purely an act of formality.

"At dawn I will board a plane and head for Italy. First, I must hand my father's possessions over to headquarters. I may not be able to return to Japan for some time."

"Oh... Come in. Do you have time to talk?"

"Mn. It shouldn't be a problem."

Kirei contained the feelings in his heart and stepped once again through the Tōsakas' front door.

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"The more I think about your leaving, the more reluctant I feel. Whatever may happen, I hope you can succeed your father Risei’s last behest and continue to assist the Tōsaka family in fulfilling a wish we have always desired..."

Tokiomi was now the Tōsaka residence's only occupant, but the guest room was nevertheless spotlessly maintained. Perhaps some low-level familiar under his control had been cleaning so as to maintain composure even in this time of intense war. When it came to Tokiomi, no less was expected.

“Though it is a pity your actions against the Einsbern family failed, I understand that you had good intentions. Perhaps this is the way that Executors work, but I hope you will duly inform me of the situation before and after you act in the future. Then I can be prepared.”

Tokiomi's magnanimous attitude made Kirei lower his head further.

"To have given you, my teacher, this much trouble at the last moment... I am truly ashamed."

Kirei raised his head, seeing the sincerity in Tokiomi’s eyes, and said to himself.

"It is true that we met only because of the Heaven's Feel, but no matter what the circumstances, I am very proud to have had you as a disciple."

Hearing this, Kirei momentarily lost control of his emotions and laughed out loud. But Tokiomi, completely misunderstanding his disciple's intentions, continued to speak in earnest.

"Talent is not something to be taken by force of will, but your sincere attitude towards training as one who walks this path is something that even I, your teacher, am very much impressed with. Kirei, from this day on you can continue to fight for the best interests of the Tōsaka family as your father did before you. What do you say?"

"I could not wish for more."

Kirei smiled slightly and nodded. Tokiomi, who for the past three years had constantly misunderstood his disciple's character and inner world, now also

misunderstood the meaning of Kirei’s smile. And so he continued to speak even more happily.

"You allow me to rest assured. I wish for my daughter to learn from you. After this Heaven's Feel ends, Kirei, you shall be Rin’s master, and guide her as such."

Then Tokiomi retrieved a letter that had previously been placed at a corner of the desk and passed it to Kirei.

"... Teacher, what is this?"

"Though it is written rather simply, it can perhaps be considered a will of sorts."

Tokiomi spoke thus, smiling wryly.

"If—and the chances are very small but a possibility nonetheless—if something unexpected happens to me, then I have written here that the Tōsaka household shall be inherited by Rin and you will be her guardian until she is mature. Pass this letter to the Clock Tower, and all further procedures will naturally be taken care of by the Association."

This time, Kirei did not stop at perfunctory verbal assent but sincerely accepted the responsibility that Tokiomi had entrusted him with from his heart. After all, Kirei was of the priesthood. It was his duty to fulfill the responsibilities entrusted to him with honesty and reliability.

"Please trust me. Even though your disciple’s abilities are limited, I will make every effort to take up the responsibility of caring for your daughter."

"Thank you, Kirei."

Though the words were brief, they contained a deep gratitude. Next, Tokiomi picked up the thin, long black box that had been beside the letter and handed it to Kirei.

"Open it and see. This is my personal gift to you."

Kirei opened the box. On the velvet-lined interior neatly lay an exquisite dagger.

"This is—"

"The Azoth dagger. It has been meticulously crafted from heirloom jewels. After it is filled with prana, it can be used as a Mystic Code. You have learned and practiced the ways of the Tōsaka magecraft; use this as the proof of your graduation."

"..."

Kirei held the dagger in his hand and examined it carefully. His gaze fell upon the sharp knife-edge and for a long time did not move away.

Kirei’s face, devoid of expression, must have seemed full of gratitude from Tokiomi's perspective.

"My benefactor... I will truly never be able to repay your great care or live up to your expectations."

"To me, you are the best reward, Kotomine Kirei. With this, I can set forth for the final, decisive battle with no regrets."

Tokiomi said with a clear smile, then got up from the sofa.

Kirei believed that moment to be an arrangement of fate.

If one were to say that it had been a mere congregation of coincidences, then how could it have been that Tōsaka Tokiomi chose precisely that time and place to provide Kotomine Kirei with that dagger in the form of a gift? Was it all not an indication of inevitability?

"I am truly sorry to have delayed you for so long. Will you still be in time for your flight—"

—Now Tokiomi was facing the direction of the guestroom exit, completely defenseless with his back to Kirei. Could this be a coincidence as well?

"No, you do not need to worry, teacher."

—Or could it be said that this was inevitable, that this was fate? That no matter how much he could have prayed or hoped, everything would have eventually been drawn toward the abyss of betrayal?

Kirei began to laugh loudly, a laugh more cheerful than ever.

"There was never been a flight to begin with."

Not even Kirei himself knew he could laugh so heartily. Moreover, the dagger in his hand struck toward the defenseless back in front of him,.

"... Ah?"

The Azoth dagger that had been a proof of love and trust slipped between ribs to directly pierce Tokiomi’s heart. This one strike by an Executor who had experienced countless battles could be said to be deathly precise. There was no intention of murder, and there was no sign of it. Perhaps even Tokiomi, who had been stabbed,

could not understand the significance of this wave of pain in his chest for a brief moment.

Tokiomi staggered forward. Turning his head, he saw only Kirei, smiling brightly, his hands stained with fresh blood—but there was never the slightest indication of understanding in Tokiomi's eyes even till the end. With only a dazed expression, devoid of anger, he collapsed onto the carpet.

To his final moment, this magus must have stubbornly believed his own understanding to be accurate and refused to accept the real truth. Unerringly believing in the path he had chosen, moving forward without the slightest hesitation every time — what a man, to not wake to the truth even after having fallen into an endless abyss.

A sparkling aura suddenly surged beside Tokiomi's rapidly cooling corpse. Shining with radiant light, the golden Servant materialized in front of Kirei.

"Hn—what a disappointing ending."

A condescending expression seeped out of those red pupils. Archer nudged the corpse of his former Master with the tip of his foot.

"I was anticipating he would make a last retaliation before death. Look at his expression. Completely at a loss. He was not aware of his own stupidity even till the end."

"That was because his Servant was in spirit form at his side. It was not illogical for him to let his guard down."

Hearing Kirei's quip, Archer began to laugh loudly.

"Already, you have learned to make jokes? Kirei, your progress is truly great."

With a serious expression, Kirei asked Archer.

"You really have no qualms about this, Gilgamesh, King of Heroes?"

"Only until I grow tired of you. Once you cease to be interesting, you will meet the same fate as this carcass lying here. If there is anyone here who should be coming to a realization, it is you by right."

The reply was extremely sharp, but Kirei showed no sign of wavering and nodded.

Indeed, he could not entrust his life to such a dangerous character. It could be said that this was a deal with the devil. A domineering and violent Servant with neither morality nor loyalty, whose interests were difficult to judge.

But—precisely because of this, they were a perfect match.

Those at the pinnacle of morality had not brought Kirei the real answer; it was actually this Heroic Spirit, who was completely at odds with morality, who could become the goal for which Kirei would fight from now on.

Kirei rolled up one sleeve, revealing the Command Seals on his arm, and chanted solemnly.

"Let thy body rest under my dominion, let my fate rest in thy blade. If thou submittest to the call of the Holy Grail, and if thou wilt obey this mind, this reason, then thou shalt respond—"

"I so swear. Thy offering shalt be my flesh and blood. Kotomine Kirei, my new Master."

The prana supply opened the moment the contract was completed. The Command Seals on his left hand, functional once again, glowed anew, accompanied by a burst of pain.

The pact was ended; and so the strongest, most wicked team involved in the fight for the Holy Grail—here, under conditions unknown to all others—was born.

"So shall we begin, Kirei? ... You shall command and draw open the curtains to this farce. As your meager prize, I will grant you the Grail."

"No problem. King of Heroes, you will certainly also draw pleasure from this. Before you find the answer you anticipate, enjoy the jubilation of this battle to your heart’s content."

The gazes from the red pupils filled with a delighted light and black pupils immersed in gratitude intertwined with each other.

-47:42:07

In the cool morning air, Emiya Kiritsugu appeared before a certain abandoned house in Miyama.

It was an old building built many decades ago, bereft of renovations or maintenance. The courtyard even possessed a storage room built in the previous era. To be exact, this was the place he had bought as a preparatory headquarters for Irisviel. Considering that even Einsbern Castle, with its location beyond city limits, had already been attacked by enemies, it became clear that purchasing this hiding spot had been far from meaningless.

Saber was not here. Normally, he could feel the Servant's presence through his Command Seals, but now he felt nothing. Perhaps she was on her way to Rider's headquarters. Realizing this, Kiritsugu planned to follow her.

It would be very easy to assassinate an apprentice magus like Waver once his hiding spot became known – however, he could only make his move once Saber had lured away the opposing Servant. Kiritsugu had also followed Tōsaka Tokiomi, who had left Fuyuki Church by himself, all the way to the Tōsaka house last night, but hadn't found any opportunity to strike. He had felt Archer's surveillance over the situation from some unknown location. If he had boldly struck his Master under such conditions, it would have been nothing short of suicide.

Although he had affirmed the target's location, Kiritsugu didn't go to the scene straightaway. Instead, he rushed to this abandoned building serving as temporary headquarters.

It wasn't his intuition, but a premonition comprised of many factors… he feared that this would be his last chance to communicate with his wife.

Now, with three Servants already fallen in battle, Kiritsugu was very aware of the situation surrounding Irisviel, the 'Vessel' of the Holy Grail. Had his heart been fragile, he would never have come here.

The meeting with his wife was now a trial for Kiritsugu, in a way his punishment.

The sacrifice required for the Holy Grail he sought was the life of the woman he loved dearly – he had to face that fact without showing even a sliver of indecisiveness.

If he could overcome this trial, then the Emiya Kiritsugu that emerged would be able to defeat all sentiment in his heart and remove all doubt. Prudently and concretely, just like a machine, it was certain that he would hold the Holy Grail in his hands.

Therefore, for the self called a weapon of war, this was the final and the greatest test.

If he could not handle it… then that meant every dream in the chest of the man called Emiya Kiritsugu held no meaning at all.

Standing in front of the door leading to the underground storage, Kiritsugu knocked out a pattern according to their arranged password. Soon, Maiya opened the heavy steel doors from within.

Kiritsugu noticed the changes in Maiya before any words were said.

Maiya, whose eyes were full of nonchalance and nihilism in every situation, now had sliver of a nervousness flit past as if Kiritsugu's appearance made her waver.

"… Are you here to visit madam?"

Kiritsugu nodded wordlessly. Maiya lowered her head and said in a low voice.

"Her current situation…"

"I know, I know everything."

No matter what, Kiritsugu needed to look at the scene in this underground storage with his own eyes. Moreover, he had long been mentally prepared for this – upon understanding this, Maiya said no more and stepped out Kiritsugu's way, then walked towards the outside of the underground storage.

Irisviel silently lay in the Magic Circle filled with prana pulsations in the corner of the dim underground storage. This figure provoked Kiritsugu's memories.

Kiritsugu and Irisviel's first meeting had been just like this. Brought by the father of the household, Acht, into the deepest part of the Einsbern family workshop, he had stood before an Irisviel deeply asleep within a sink of amniotic fluid.

As the Vessel of the Grail – why would they give a contraption with only a few years' usage such a beautiful appearance? Back then, he had really felt it was unreasonable.

Is this thing the Holy Grail? When he had asked this question of the old magus beside him, she who had been deep asleep suddenly opened her eyes. The eyes that stared at him through the amniotic fluid floating in front of her face, that gaze

filled with dark crimson, had completely enthralled Kiritsugu. He could not forget it to this day.

It was the same now as it was then.

Irisviel opened her eyes. She and Kiritsugu looked at each other, then she gave a small, gentle smile.

“Ahh – Kiritsugu –”

Irisviel stretched out her hand and caressed Kiritsugu’s face.

Even a simple movement like that required the current Irisviel to spend a relatively large amount of energy – her icy cold fingers convulsed a little in reflection of that.

“– Is this a dream? You really – came to see me again – “

“Ahh, yes.”

It was easier than he thought, and he could still speak freely. It was the same as when he had sunk Natalia. Language and actions were not affected at all. No matter how tangled his heart was or how frayed his emotions became, his two hands could still complete the job with precision.

He could obtain victory – he believed that firmly.

Now, Emiya Kiritsugu was prepared for anything and could completely guarantee the trustworthiness of his functions. The strength of humans was never something that bothered Kiritsugu. No amount of confusion or anguish could affect his work. For Kiritsugu, his mental system of recognizing a goal and acting towards it could function without being disturbed by any factor whatsoever.

From this perspective – he was the most perfect tool because he had that fatal flaw as a human.

“I… feel very happy…”

Irisviel gently caressed the cheek of the man who can only be called a machine and said softly.

“For being able to fall in love with you… to marry you… to have a husband, to have a daughter. In the fast few years… you gave me everything I wanted… I no longer have any regrets. Everything, all the happiness in this world, I’ve already…”

“… Sorry, there are many, many promises left unfulfilled.”

I said I'd get you out of that eternally wintry castle and go look at the flowers blossoming outside, to look at the sea that sparkled with light on the waves.

I once promised you that I'd one day bring you with me and look at all those things.

Now that he remembered it, it had been such an irresponsible promise.

"No, it was good enough. Mmm."

Irisviel didn't complain about those promises that couldn't be fulfilled and said with a smile.

"All those happinesses I didn't experience… all that was left undone, please give them to Illya. Your daughter – my most important Illya."

At that moment, Kiritsugu finally understood the reason why Irisviel, who was approaching the edge of destruction, could still smile with such strength.

"You must, bring that child there."

The mother who bestowed her hope onto her child had no fear.

That was how she could face her own demise with a smile, with no trace of terror.

"Let that child, see everything I didn't see in my stead… let her see, the cherry blossoms in the spring, the clouds in summer…"

"I understand."

Kiritsugu nodded.

For a machine that only knew to obtain the Holy Grail, this was a meaningless action and yet another meaningless promise.

Even so, he would still nod as a human.

After he had obtained the Holy Grail and fulfilled his wish of saving the world… the machine that had fulfilled its duty would change back into a human again, right?

At that time, he would definitely remember his promise to his wife. And at that time, do the duty of a good father and love his child thoroughly.

That was something for the near future. It could come true after only a few more short days.

However – this was not that time.

"This… needs to be returned to…"

Quivering, Irsiviel placed her hand on her chest and concentrated all the prana within her onto her fingertips.

Suddenly, in her empty hands a golden light started to shine, enveloping the entire storeroom with a cover of warm brilliance.

"…"

Holding his breath, Kiritsugu looked upon everything happening before him. The light gradually formed a silhouette, then turned into an object that shone with a metallic sheen and fell into Irisviel's hands.

The golden scabbard.

"Iri…"

"This… is something very important for you. In the final battle, it'll be definitely be useful…"

Irisviel's voice sounded even weaker than before.

That was to be expected. Irisviel, who hid in the Magic Circle in this underground storeroom in order to slow the speed of her destruction, had separated the last thing protecting her, the miraculous Noble Phantasm – Avalon • All is a Distant Utopia, sealed within her as a Conceptual Weapon – from her body using her own hands.

"I… will be fine. Maiya's here to protect me… so…"

"… I understand."

Upon calm contemplation.

Originally, as Saber's Noble Phantasm, Avalon had the ability to provide prana to the Servant. Now, since Irisviel could no longer participate in front-line battles with Saber, continuing to equip her with Avalon no longer had any strategic meaning.

Even if this Noble Phantasm could slow the speed of her destruction, it did no good in the bigger picture – the most correct choice now was to repossess this Noble Phantasm from her.

Kiritsugu took the golden scabbard, placed his wife's weak body on the ice-cold floor, stood up, and said.

"Then, I'll be going."

"Mm – take care."

The words of farewell were very brief.

Emiya Kiritsugu turned and walked out.

Maiya, who had been standing and waiting outside, couldn't help but draw a sharp breath when she saw Kiritsugu coming out of the underground storeroom. Of course, she did not know the true meaning of the Noble Phantasm shining with light in Kiritsugu's hands. Actually, what surprised Maiya was the change in Kiritsugu himself.

"We'll go finish Rider's Master today. Saber has already left, right?"

"… Yes. Just this morning, not too long ago before you came here."

"Very good – Maiya, I'll keep entrusting the job of protecting Irisviel to you."

"Yes, sir… Hmm, Kiritsugu?"

Just as Kiritsugu was about to walk out of the door, Maiya stopped him in a dazed voice.

"What's wrong?"

Maiya stared for a moment at the eyes that turned to her, then made a small sigh and said after lowering her head.

"It's finally back. The expression that you had back then."

"… Really?"

After a low reply, Kiritsugu continued walking outside without once turning back.

-47:39:59

After that completely unbelievable day, Waver finally came to terms with the implications of the current situation.

After getting up in the morning, Waver told the old couple he would be coming back later than usual today, then rushed to Shinto without even eating breakfast.

Though the worst of rush hour was yet to come, the bus heading towards the station already seemed to be full; perhaps too many people were commuting between Fuyuki and the neighboring town.

With a great ruckus of people around him, Waver was unused to the way the crowd pushed him along. But right then, when he felt so hollow and empty, he was actually filled with a sense of security.

Over the past few days, there had been an overwhelming presence continuously filling the space next to him. In comparison, the level of oppression from the crowd felt more like an empty lot abandoned after a bustling ritual.

Of course, Rider's presence was always next to him. Even now, he could still feel the majestic and oppressive atmosphere of the Servant in spiritual form.

Speaking of which, the big man had been maintaining his spiritual shape, not once materializing since that great battle with Caster two nights before.

That wouldn't have been strange for any other Servant. Out of battle mode, there was no need to specifically materialize and expend excess prana. However, that didn't apply to Alexander. The man participated in the War of the Holy Grail with materialization as his goal, after all.

If the situation had only lasted a few hours, it could have been interpreted as him just having some fun. But it became unusual when he didn't appear for an entire day. There could only be one reason why Rider would not materialize.

As a Master, Waver could still converse with his Servant of spiritual form at any time. If Waver called for him now, there was no doubt that Rider would respond immediately. However, Waver didn't dare open his mouth and inquire. It would be better not to start a conversation until he knew how Rider would respond and had thoroughly prepared himself in advance.

In order to be prepared for everything, Waver decided to start shopping in the morning.

First of all, he needed to go to the supermarket's outdoor equipment sale and purchase sleeping bags and mattresses suitable for winter wilderness. They were expensive, but nothing in comparison to the gaming console Rider had bought.

What really irritated him were the prices at which pharmacies sold energy drinks and portable heaters. Achieving the same degrees of medication and equipment with magecraft would have required huge amounts of prana worth ten times the effort. Though he felt it bruised his pride as a magus, Waver, with anger beyond reason, still bought more than he actually needed.

He was intensely annoyed at the fact that he had been born in the modern world. What bad luck. If only the era he had grown up in was full of respect and fear for magecraft! Why did he have to be born into a time when a portable heater only cost 400 yen and no one knew the harshness of life?

In any case, when he was done buying all of his necessities, Waver took the bus back to Miyama town, bought some eel fishball bento from the supermarket two bus stops down the road from the MacKenzies', then heated it gently with a microwave. If he wanted to eat his meal before it got cold, he'd have to hurry to reach his destination.

Actually, Waver was already eager to ask Rider just what had happened. However, he couldn't do anything to a Servant who offered no explanation and didn't even want to show his face. Had Waver been more outgoing, he definitely would have gotten the answer he wanted. But he had many concerns – as an immature magus, his sense of powerlessness made him afraid to question Rider.

He thought this in his heart, and yet refused to bow his head to Rider. After all, it was humiliating enough being ordered around by his own Servant.

He was indeed very weak and very useless, but Waver was reluctant to admit it. If he could achieve the best results through prudent preparation, then even Rider wouldn't be able to underestimate him anymore. With these thoughts in mind, Waver chose to likewise remain stubbornly silent in the face of Rider's muteness.

Waver had soon traversed the residential areas and walked into a bushy forest soon to be developed into an urban park.

Passing through the brushwood with no roads yet to be developed, Waver walked into its greatest depths. Although the scenes here varied drastically between morning and night, Waver still marched towards its center with familiarity.

Having finally reached his destination and made sure all of the surroundings were in order, Waver sighed in relief. After placing the thermal mat on the leaf-strewn ground, Waver sat on it and began eating the bento he had just bought from the supermarket. The microwave-heated bento was already cold and had lost its flavor, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that it contained the energy he needed to maintain life.

“– Does that taste good?”

It was Rider’s voice, something he hadn’t heard for an entire day and night. Even in spiritual form, was food still the only thing that could arouse his interest? Waver couldn’t help but idly wonder.

“No, it’s disgusting. It’s probably the most disgusting thing in Japanese cuisine.”

A reply like that made Rider in spiritual form sigh as if in regret and say:

“Kid, do you remember a shop called ‘Shogi Okonomiyaki’ that you passed in Shinto? The innovative pancake they sell there is really damn miraculous. Pity you didn’t buy it…”

“If you still want to eat it, then hurry up and recover to a state that allows you to materialize.”

“…”

A strange silence began to fill the atmosphere. However, Waver now appeared to be quite at ease. The apprentice magus continued to speak as he ate the eel bento in big gulps.

“Do you know where we are? This is the place where you were summoned. The quality of this spiritual ground hardly needs saying, and the Magic Circle used that night for the summoning hasn’t been damaged either. This is the leyline in Fuyuki that suits you the best. This place would definitely help make your recovery more efficient.”

Actually, Waver had noticed it two nights ago. It was impossible for a large Noble Phantasm like Ionian Hetairoi to be used two nights in a row without any repercussions.

A large amount of prana was required just to expand such a powerful Reality Marble and maintain it for a short time. Moreover, in his battle with Caster, Rider had also been within the bounded field and received heavy damage.

Above all, so much prana had been spent that Rider, who clung to his physical so obstinately, was forced into spiritual form in order to concentrate on recuperation. It was obvious that this was no small amount of prana.

“I’ll be staying here the whole day today and doing nothing but sleeping. So you can take as much of my prana as you'd like, as long as it doesn’t kill me. This way, it should help your recovery a lot too.”

Rider’s spiritual form was silent for a long time, as if he had his mouth open in shock. Then he laughed loudly.

“… Hahaha. Why didn’t you say so earlier if you noticed it? Mm, I’m really sorry.”

“Idiot! If you don’t hurry up and recover from your current condition, I’ll be the one in danger!”

Waver felt angry all of a sudden. Rider, who had been so carefree, actually felt apologetic. But if he put some thought into the real reason behind their whole predicament, Waver was the one who should have felt embarrassed.

Waver’s reason for not wanting Rider to maintain his physical form was obvious – as a Master, Waver’s prana supply was far beneath the prana expenditure Rider required in order to recover.

Of course, it was humiliating for the Master. He was not fit to command a Servant as powerful as Rider. It was the best proof that he was nothing but a weak, second-rate magus. Humiliation and anger: those were accurate reflections of Waver’s current mood.

Was it Waver who was at fault for being unable to accurately grasp his Servant’s condition, or was it Rider, who had hidden and kept this truth from him? If Rider had straightforwardly brought it up when he felt his prana supply running low and made Waver prepare for it ahead of time, then perhaps there could have been some other way.

After Waver finished his bento, he drained the energy drink he had bought in one gulp, then asked the spiritual entity beside him.

“… What’s wrong? You’ve been quiet.”

“No, I’m wondering if I can hold on a bit longer. The battle at the river bank wasn’t as exhausting as I thought.”

In order to stop the sea demon Caster had summoned from coming on land, Rider had maintained the area of his Ionian Hetairoi Reality Marble beyond its limit. No matter what, it was too much. Back then, Waver had been more worried about his Servant than his alliance with Saber.

“In the end, your trump card was surprisingly wasteful of prana, wasn’t it?”

“Not at all. Just that its size became bigger. Those guys in the army weren’t summoned out, so it didn’t cost too much prana to maintain.”

“Liar. Large magecrafts of that degree need to use an enormous amount of prana just to be activated. Once activated, the army summoned within was a pretty surprising expenditure for you, wasn’t it?”

“…”

“When I first saw it, I really did think it was a very efficient Noble Phantasm, just like you said. In retrospect, the amount of prana you took from my Magic Circuits when you first fought Assassin was really too small.”

That was when Waver had misunderstood the amount of prana required for Ionian Hetairoi. Even magecraft must obey the greater rule of ‘equivalent exchange’. Therefore, activating a large magecraft of such a degree was definitely not an easy thing. Waver couldn’t help but feel angry once again at his own naïveté.

The excessive intake of energy drinks made Waver feel nauseous, and his chest felt as if it was on fire. Waver sat up on the thermal mat, took off his boots, and dived into his sleeping bag.

“Rider, why did you use your own stored prana instead of using mine? It is my duty to provide it. And you made that decision twice in a row without consulting me… just what are you trying to do?”

“As for… that.”

Rider made a deep sigh as if it were difficult to explain.

“Frankly, as a Servant I am purely a killer of souls. If I had involved you when I released all of my prana, it could have threatened your life.”

“Even so – I was prepared.”

Waver said in a low voice, staring at the ground.

“I don’t want this to become your solo battle. This is my first time joining a war. If I do not make sacrifices or shed blood, and do not obtain victory, then this is completely meaningless.”

Back when they'd had the chance to stroll around Shinto, he was quickly laughed at for the meaning behind his battle. But even so, he did not cast it aside. He did not give it up. No matter how much it was laughed at for being tiny, what was in this heart would never be yielded to anyone.

“Do you know why I want to obtain the Grail? I’m not concerned with what happens after I obtain the Grail. I just want to prove this for everyone to see! I just wanted to confirm it! That I, Waver – even someone like me is able to grab what belongs to me with my own two hands!”

“– But kid, that’s only meaningful under the premise that the Holy Grail actually exists, right?”

Rider’s surprising words left Waver gaping and speechless.

“…Huh?”

“Everyone's fighting madly for the Fuyuki Grail, but does it really exist? It’s only a legend. No one’s ever seen it with their own eyes, have they?”

What did Rider mean? Waver could not completely comprehend his words, but neither could he refute them, and so only nodded.

“True, it’s like you said, but…”

“I have also fought for things with an ‘uncertain existence’.”

Somehow, Rider’s words contained a hint of bitterness and sorrow far from his usual majesty.

“I want to behold the endless sea with my own eyes – I continuously crusaded across the world for the sole sake of this dream. Those who believed in me fought with me without a doubt, and even sacrificed their own lives. However, even till the end, it was only in their dreams that they saw the endless sea of which I spoke.”

“…”

“Finally, the eastern crusade was disbanded under the persuasion of those who did not trust me. But that was the right thing to do. Had I continued, my army would surely have been defeated somewhere along the way. I only realized that the earth

was a globe when I came to this era. It was such a farce. Now, anyone could figure out that there is no endless sea just by looking at a map. My so-called dream back then would be nothing more than a delusion now."

"Hey, Rider."

Even if that was the truth.

To hear Alexander say it – it shocked Waver quite a bit.

A man who had marched forward so bravely towards the vivid dream in his heart – why would he now deny his own dream with such a calm voice?

However, those words of rebuttal tangled in Waver's throat and remained unsaid in the end.

Waver had the same dream as Rider, but he could not express it no matter what. Because it concerned Waver's pride.

"I've become tired of others sacrificing themselves because of my whims. If I can ascertain that the Grail indeed exists somewhere, then I will obtain it even if it means your life and mine… but unfortunately, we still don't know whether the Holy Grail really exists. I don't want to make the same mistake, a mistake like not knowing the world is a globe."

"But I… even so, I'm still your Master."

Waver wanted to argue, but he immediately mocked himself in his heart.

He couldn't even provide prana, which should have been the least he could do.

He couldn't even detect the weakness of his Servant, who pushed himself to participate in battle.

As if unaware of Waver's worries, Rider's voice, in spiritual form, once again returned to its usual carefree style, and he laughed out loud.

"Kid, that goes without saying. True, your Magic Circuits are a lot more powerful than usual. The leylines here are pretty good too. If we rest for the whole day like this, then we can get some things going at night."

Waver himself could already feel the amount of prana Rider had absorbed through his Magic Circuits. The previous burning sensation in his chest had already completely disappeared; in its stead was an overwhelming exhaustion as if all the

strength in his body had been drawn away. Even moving his fingers and opening his eyes became difficult.

“… What? Get some things going? What do you plan to do after this?”

“Hmm, it’s gonna be like this… Tonight, we should regard Saber as our opponent first, and attack that castle in the forest again.”

“Not going to chat with them, right?”

“Of course not. The alliance is over. What should be said has all been said. What’s next is to oppose each other with everything we’ve got.”

Although Rider’s voice was still powerful and confident, there was an audible wariness hidden within. That Saber would definitely count as a powerful enemy even for Rider. He was already prepared for a majestic and desperate battle to the end.

“… If we keep this up, how much can you recover by nighttime?”

“About that… if all goes well, I won't be able to use Gordius Wheel in its most powerful form, but simple flight shouldn’t be a problem.”

Then, as if it had been weighing on his mind, the spiritual form continued speaking with a sigh mixed in his words.

“But Ionian Hetairoi – I fear I can only use it one more time.”

“Oh…”

In the midst of all this misfortune, having one final trump card was the greatest strength left in his hands.

“That should be left for the battle with Archer. I can’t handle that goldie’s killing blow without my trump card. The other enemies can probably be finished with just the war chariot.”

That was fine strategically, but a new question suddenly emerged in Waver’s mind.

“But… Rider, why did you pick Saber specifically as your opponent?”

“Hmm?”

“Didn’t you say that you weren’t regarding that woman as an enemy anymore? Besides, with the way you are now, shouldn’t you do your best to minimize the number of battles in the future?

"And Archer… never mind, that's some kind of strange promise that you made yourself; can't go back on that now. But the battle with Saber should be put off; best to wait for other Servants to finish her off."

Listening to Waver's serious advice, Rider couldn't help but laugh.

"Oi, kid. If I could stretch out my fingers, I'd give you a hard flick on the forehead."

"Wha – what!? Isn't that the best strategy?"

Had Rider's physical form been here, Waver would've been covering his forehead with his hands. However, now that the other is in spiritual form, the short magus appeared a bit more forceful than usual.

"I must be the one to defeat Saber. We're both Heroic Spirits, so that is my duty."

"… What does that mean?"

"If I'm not the one to defeat her, then that idiotic woman will continue walking down her wrong path. Then it'd really be too sad for her."

Although Waver had a hard time understanding him, he understood the feelings of this King of Conquerors, this guy who was willing to let even the War of the Holy Grail go.

Therefore, as a Master, extra thoughts were better discarded – in fact, Waver didn't even have the optimism to wish for someone else to finish off Saber. The Servant called Saber was truly too powerful. That mysterious golden Servant, Archer, was also a mighty competitor. Waver thought he was very shrewd, and it was nearly impossible that Saber would damage him before Rider fought her.

For Rider, a face-to-face confrontation with Saber was more or less inevitable.

"… Never mind, if that's how you want it to be… fine…"

Waver wanted to argue a bit more, but realized that nothing would change no matter what he said and simply gave up. He eventually felt so tired that he could not fend off the sleepiness and tucked himself into his brand new sleeping bag, all the while feeling the warmth of the downy feather quilt.

"Alright, stop holding yourself up. Go to sleep, kid. Rest is your battle now."

"Mmm…"

Although there was still much to be said, they could be said when he woke up. He didn't need to be on guard against getting his forehead flicked when conversing with

a Rider not in physical form, but he kept feeling as if something was missing there. Moreover, he was at a point where it was tiring just to open his mouth and speak. It was best to just have a good nap.

And so, Waver began to relax his nearly exhausted body and sank into a deep slumber.

-37:02:47

When Irisviel opened her eyes again, the first thing to fall into her sight was the light of the setting sun dying the high windows of the underground storage a sheen of crimson red.

Since losing consciousness, she had been immersed in a deep sleep and felt as though the entire day had disappeared. Rather than sleeping, her deteriorating body was better described as entering a near death state.

But it felt fine for the moment, so maybe such a long rest had some effect after all. She still didn't have enough strength to sit up, but she could at least gather enough breath to speak.

Irisviel looked to her side and discovered Hisau Maiya still sitting in a corner of the room, still as a painting. She was in the same place with the same posture as before Irisviel had fallen asleep, but the razor sharp look emanating from her eyes held not a sliver of exhaustion or fatigue. She was just staring blankly into air.

Though she made a dependable sight, she could easily have been mistaken for a robot or familiar. Even Irisviel couldn't help but feel a certain degree of fear towards her. Just what kind of training and how strong a will must she have had to be able to maintain such a degree of focus? It was unimaginable.

With some awe, Irisviel suddenly realized – this woman called Hisau Maiya may have achieved a state above the realm that Kiritsugu pursued.

"– Hey, Maiya."

Irisviel called softly. Like a hound that suddenly heard its calling trumpet, Maiya immediately turned her eyes towards Irisviel.

"Why… do you fight for Kiritsugu?"

"… Because I have nothing else."

When she realized that her charge was not in any pain or discomfort and just wanted to chat, Maiya relaxed her taut nerves a little and answered after a short pause for thought.

"I can't remember anything concerning my family or my name. This name, Hisau Maiya, was given to me by Kiritsugu when he made my fake passport."

" – Huh?"

Seeing the surprise on Irisviel's face, the end of Maiya's mouth twitched with a small smile. For someone like her, who showed no discernible emotion on her face, that was the limit of what she could do to show her relaxed mood.

"All I can remember is that it was a very poor country. There was no hope, there was no future. The only things left were communal hatred and conflict over food for survival.

"War would never end. There were no funds left to maintain armies, but the mutual slaughter continued without a moment's pause… No one remembered whose idea it was, but at that time someone decided it was faster to get children to go to the frontline with guns than to hire soldiers and train them."

"…"

"Therefore, I don't remember anything before I had a gun in my hand. I could only keep killing others to prolong my own life. Snipe my enemy, pull back the trigger; that was the only function left in my being. Everything else was discarded… the children who couldn't do that were all killed by those children who could. I lived on aimlessly just like that until I met Kiritsugu."

As Maiya spoke, she lowered her head to look her at hands. Those long, slender fingers possessed no feminine gentleness, only comparable to sharp weapons of murder.

"As a human, my heart had already died. Only my body still functioned, maintaining my human behavior. The person who picked me up and kept my 'life' was Kiritsugu; therefore, he can use my life in any way he wishes… That is the reason why I'm staying here."

Although Irisviel had long predicted that Maiya had a tragic past, the things she said far surpassed Irisviel's imagination.

Irisviel was silent and didn't know how to respond. This time, it was Maiya who opened her mouth and posed a question instead.

"– Oh?"

Irisviel hadn't expected Maiya to say such a thing and couldn't help but feel surprised.

“You’ve always lived in such a secluded castle and known precious little about the outside world. Why would you support Kiritsugu, who vowed to change the world, to such a degree that you would be willing to sacrifice your own life…?”

“I –”

Maiya’s words once again made Irisviel sink deep into thought.

Emiya Kiritsugu, her husband, the man with a dream to ‘save the world’. Now that she knew he sought the Holy Grail hidden in her own body, did her current self still hold the same ideal as he did?

“ – True. To be honest, I don’t understand Kiritsugu’s ideal all that much.”

Yes, her answer was – negative.

“In the end, I probably only pretended to understand. Maybe it was just to stay together with the person I love. Like you said, Maiya, I know almost nothing of the world Kiritsugu wants to change. The ideal in my heart was probably just something Kiritsugu taught me.”

“… Do you think that?”

“Mmm. But please keep it a secret from Kiritsugu.”

This was an incredible feeling for Irisviel. She had said words in front of this person she would never say in front of her own husband.

“No matter what the situation, I would tell him I firmly believed him to be right. I could even sacrifice my life for his ideal. I pretended that I possessed the same ideal as him. If I gave my life for an ideal we both shared – compared to a woman who simply sacrificed herself for her husband, wouldn’t I have become less of a burden for Kiritsugu?”

“I see.”

Her love for Kiritsugu and her trust in Saber were two completely different feelings. For Irisviel, this feeling of relying on someone, a feeling she was having for the first time, could probably be called ‘friendship’.

“Then, madam, don’t you have any wishes of your own?”

As she was again asked this question, Irisviel couldn’t help but remember the battle she and Maiya had faced together in the forest. Back then, faced with Kotomine

Kirei's enormous and overwhelming presence, just where had that surge of fighting spirit come from?

"I probably do have… a wish. I wish for Kiritsugu and Saber to obtain victory. I, for them, wish them to possess the Grail."

Of course, that would also mean Irisviel's death, her eternal farewell with Kiritsugu.

However, even so, this wish – became the fountain that provided the heaving courage in Irisviel's heart.

"Is that… the so-called wish of the Einsbern family, the achievement of the Third Magic?"

"No. I don't mind even if we don't reach the Greater Grail. What I hope for is an end to the war forever. It's the same as what Kiritsugu seeks; to change the structure of this world and end all fighting. This battle for the Holy Grail at Fuyuki City would be no exception, wouldn't it?

"This is already the fourth time, and I wish for this to be the last Heaven's Feel. In terms of homunculi sacrificed as vessels of the Grail – I hope I will be the last one."

"Mmm."

Illyasviel von Einsbern. A creature with all great achievements of alchemy gathered within her, born from the womb of a homunculus and conceived with the sperm of a magus. Although she hadn't seen her with her own eyes, Maiya had heard of her existence long ago.

"It was the plan of the head of the family. For the 'protector of the Grail' after me, he planned to use a homunculus with even greater mechanisms. He not only implanted the secrets of the Holy Grail into the embryo, but also added Magic Circuits to her exterior and made her physical body capable of becoming a vessel of the 'Grail' by itself.

"The head of the family had already predicted the possibility of 'the Fifth round' before the 'Fourth' Heaven's Feel began, and he allowed me to give birth to Illya. If Kiritsugu and I fail, that child will become the experimental specimen for 'the Dress of Heaven'."

At this time, Irisviel's voice was full of the gentleness of familial love.

This was the concrete evidence that the homunculus called Irisviel was not simply an artificial machine. She had the heart of a human, the benevolence of love, a

smile of happiness, and tears of sadness. The warmth swelling in her heart was the most important part of being human.

“When I held that child and fed her… I was also very much aware that she wouldn’t be able to escape the destiny of becoming a ‘vessel’ in the end. Can you understand the feelings of a mother who felt endless despair when looking at her beloved child?”

“…”

Maiya was silent and didn’t answer. Irisviel continued.

“However, that is the destiny carried by the homunculi of the Einsberns. Be it that child or my granddaughter, this sorrow is tasted again and again every time a daughter is born. This fate will be repeated every time the Fuyuki Holy Grail descends.

"Therefore, I hope this pain can end here with me, using my body to end the stubborn wish of the Einsberns. If my wish can be fulfilled, then my daughter will be freed from this tragic destiny. That child would probably be able to live her entire life as a human and have nothing to do with the Holy Grail.”

“Are those the feelings of a mother?”

Only when Maiya asked this did Irisviel realize she had exposed too much of her feelings. She gave an embarrassed, bitter smile.

“Perhaps. Maybe you find it hard to understand, Maiya.”

“It's not too hard. I’ve also been a mother, myself.”

“– Huh?”

It really was a surprising reply. Irisviel almost doubted her own ears.

As if feeling slightly apologetic for surprising Irisviel so, Maiya related the event in a calm voice.

“I… actually experienced pregnancy and delivery, although it could be said that it was an accident.”

“… Were you married once?”

“No. I don’t know who the father is. During battle, every night in the barracks, the male soldiers would come to all of us female soldiers and… I can’t remember when it started… anyways, I became pregnant soon after I became a woman.

"The child wasn’t given a name and I don’t know if he’s still alive. If he hasn’t died, he must still exist in some remote corner of that battlefield, fighting for his life. The children there are all given guns and sent to battle when they turn five years old.”

“How can it…”

When she heard this former child soldier in front of her recounting tragic stories of the past, Irisviel couldn’t help but feel stunned.

“Are you surprised? But such things are definitely not new in this world, are they? Modern terrorists and guerrilla warfare groups all know the benefits of using children as soldiers, and early successes such as I also serve as evidence. Therefore, children who share my experience did not decrease in the modern age, but rather increased.”

Maiya narrated silently, her eyes seeming less and less alive. Sorrow and hatred also began to disappear from her voice. Perhaps the only thing left in her memories was endless despair.

“Madam, perhaps you thought the world you saw with your own eyes for the first time was very beautiful and envied the happy people living there. However, I am very envious of you, who always lived in that castle. You did not experience any of the terror and ugliness of this world.”

Although there were no feelings of jealousy or hatred in Maiya’s contemplation, Irisviel felt rather embarrassed upon hearing it.

Maiya seemed to detect Irisviel’s feelings, so she continued.

“If such a world can really be changed… then no matter how Kiritsugu chooses to use my life toward that end, I will not utter a single word of refusal.”

But I don’t know how to do anything apart from fighting – Maiya muttered softly to herself. There was no exaggeration in that sentence. Without goals and without hope, her heart was as desolate as a barren, fire-ravaged field.

Although her inner feelings were completely different from Kiritsugu’s, they were amazingly similar as soldiers. Maiya’s existence constantly served as a reminder to Kiritsugu, and at the same time provided him with an example. Because of Maiya’s close existence, Kiritsugu had sealed himself within this dilemma and made himself a cruel hunting machine devoid of mercy.

“What… do you want to do after Kiritsugu achieves his wish?”

When Irisviel asked this, Maiya's eyes once again became confused.

"– I never imagined I'd be able to complete this task and live. If I really managed to stay alive, I would have no reason to keep living. There shouldn't be any place for me in the world changed by Kiritsugu."

A world without war had no place for someone like her, someone who knew nothing but combat. For Maiya, it was the logical conclusion.

Such sad, melancholic feelings made Irisviel speak out.

"No, that's not true. Maiya, you still have things you have to do after the war finishes."

"…"

Irisviel continued speaking while staring at the confused eyes of the female soldier.

"You must search for your family and your own name, and the whereabouts of your child. They are things that shouldn't be forgotten. They are things that should be remembered."

"Is that so…"

Contrary to Irisviel's passion, Maiya's reply was full of emotionless nonchalance.

"If we really can usher in a world without war, then the memories of people like me would be nothing short of nightmarish. Remembering them would only make me more painful. Would you want me to bring the seed of hatred into the utopia we've finally created?"

"That's not true. Your life wasn't a dream. It contains facts that really happened. A peace created by burying all those memories in the darkness of the past is nothing but a sinful lie. I think a truly peaceful world shouldn't simply forget those past pains. Instead, we should solemnly remember those previous pains and sacrifices so we don't go down the same sad road and can continue on to create a peaceful new world."

"…"

Maiya gazed at Irisviel silently – then spoke with a slightly more relieved face.

"You should have said these things to Kiritsugu earlier. Had you done that, maybe he would already have obtained salvation."

Maiya's heartfelt words brought both joy and loneliness into Irisviel's heart.

Perhaps – as she was on the verge of destruction, she would never have the chance to chat with her husband again.

“– Then, Maiya, I trust you to bring these words to him. Tell him I said them.”

Maiya replied with a vague shrug of her shoulders.

“I’ll do as I see fit. But that’s to come after the war finishes. We shouldn’t be careless for now.”

Although Maiya’s tone was very cold, Irisviel still heard the playfulness in her words.

“Really, you’re just –”

Before Irisviel finished speaking, the underground storage suddenly began to shake violently .

Maiya rushed to Irisviel and held her shoulders, quickly switching to battle mode. Her gaze became as sharp as a blade, and she grabbed her light machine gun with her right hand and aimed it at the iron doors of the underground storage.

The underground storage shook once again. This time, the thick and heavy iron door deformed with a violent impact from the outside, as if someone outside was powerfully banging on it. It was a terrible feat only possible through use of a mechanical crane. For the two participants of this Heaven’s Feel, it wasn’t something worthy of surprise – rather, they only felt despair.

If it was really a Servant attempting to charge into the underground storage, then Maiya’s weapons would be completely useless against it. Moreover, they couldn’t even escape in the current situation, truly trapped at a dead end.

However, before terror could even pass through their minds, there came a disbelieving confusion.

Who could have known that Irisviel was hiding in this underground storage?

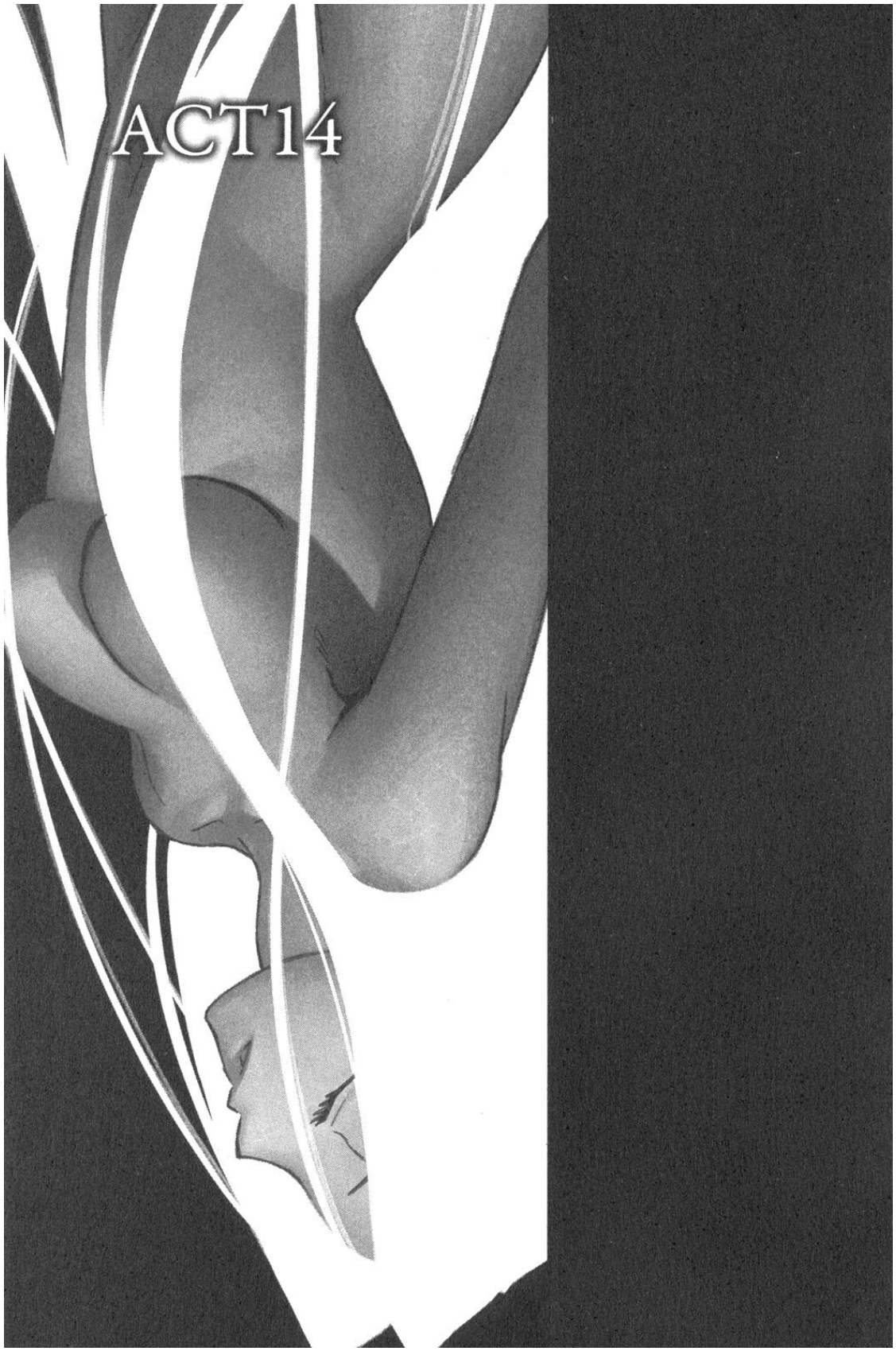
The protective barrier should have detected any clairvoyance or arriving familiars. However, the enemy skipped any reconnaissance and directly sent the Servant to Irisviel’s safe house with such accuracy; could it be that the enemy had learned of this place a long time ago?

A third shockwave. Before the iron doors were destroyed, the earthen walls around them could no longer take such a powerful impact and collapsed first.

With soaring dust, the iron doors fell into the underground storage. The setting sun shone in through the doorway, dying the room a shade of bloodstained red.

And that giant figure looming over the debris and dust was undoubtedly – Servant Rider, King of Conquerors, Alexander.

Maiya could only hold onto the light machine gun in her hands with utter despair.


ACT14

Act 14

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When it was almost dusk, it vaguely occurred to Saber that today’s ambush might once again be a waste of effort. The thought frustrated and unsettled her.

Saber arrived at Miyama in accordance to the intelligence gained from the Master of Archer, Tōsaka Tokiomi, and located the residence of Glen Mackenzie and his wife. Upon hearing the doorbell, an old woman appeared before her. According to her, her grandson and his friend had indeed been staying there over the past few days. The old woman seemed to have mistaken Saber for her grandson’s friend as well, and so told the whole truth without reserve.

Saber persuaded the old woman to describe the appearance and clothing of the two people. Undoubtedly, they were Rider and his Master. It was regrettable, however, that she could not feel the presence of any Servant from there. A house of this size—if there was a Servant hiding within, it would have been possible to sense his presence even at the entrance.

According to the old woman, those two had left in the morning and not returned since. It was worth suspecting that they somehow knew of Saber's coming arrival and fled as a result, but it was truly difficult to imagine that the haughty King of Conquerors would actually resort to cowardly tricks like flight. If he intended to seize victory, he would definitely attack head-on.

In the end, Saber came to the conclusion that they had simply missed each other by coincidence. Courteously taking her leave of the old woman, she decided to keep watch from an area slightly away from the house and wait for Rider to return.

Of course, she would conceal the truth from the old woman. Though they had been deceived by Waver Velvet, this family was, in the end, completely ordinary and unrelated to the events surrounding them. Rider must have considered this as well.

Rider had been able to temporarily set aside the fight for the Holy Grail in order to stop Caster’s atrocities and prevent Fuyuki City from falling into crisis. Thus, Saber made this judgment: the King of Conquerors would never act against the pride-worthy deeds of a true Heroic Spirit. After Rider returned and discovered Saber, he would definitely choose a location worthy of a Servants’ battle and have a showdown that was open and aboveboard.

Aware that she was already very conspicuous just walking around, Saber decided to sit on a chair at the closest bus station and wait. Henceforth, she began to keep intent watch, but a few hours passed by without any sign of movement.

Though she could not directly see the Mackenzie house from her position, Rider would definitely sense the presence of a Servant upon his return and seek out Saber. He was not the sort of opponent to ambush her or run away. He would definitely welcome Saber's intent of challenge and lead her to a suitable location for combat.

As strange as it was to say, Saber professed a hundred percent trust toward this Servant, Rider. Though their respective viewpoints could not be reconciled, it was incontestable that the other Heroic Spirit would take action according to his pride as a king. He would only challenge openly, and would never make secret plans or commit acts of betrayal. That was because Rider would never choose despicable tactics or strategies that would damage his reputation.

It could be said that Saber's unease originated from her allies rather than from her opponents.

Her Master, Emiya Kiritsugu, was eyeing Rider's Master with intentions and combat goals completely opposite to her own. At this very instant, it could even be that he had used Saber as bait to lure Rider out and was now keeping watch from afar—there was nothing wrong in thinking so. Indeed, she had to make such a mental preparation. Kiritsugu probably believed the instant at which Rider went all out to confront Saber to be the optimal opportunity to assassinate his Master.

With this thought in mind, Saber's heart could not help but feel weighed down.

Kiritsugu might as well carry out a showdown between magi, with the Masters of Berserker and Archer as targets.

That would have been fine. Kiritsugu would only be obtaining victory through strategy and power play rather than by relying on Servant Saber. It was for his own legitimate reasons that Kiritsugu wanted the Grail. It was not unreasonable to desire a victory that could be obtained through more reliable means.

But in this showdown with Rider, Alexander, King of Conquerors, Saber had a deep boundary that she was absolutely unwilling to compromise.

If there could not be a fair showdown between them—not as Servants, tools by which to fight for the Grail, but as Heroic Spirits who possessed great pride—Saber

would be forever unable to undo the knot left in her heart by the ‘Grail question-and-answer session’ from several days ago.

Alexander reveled in his tyrannical kingship without restraint; he reveled in the violent way of the Ionian Hetairoi, and took pride in it. If she were not to defeat him with the similar symbol of the King of Knights' ideology, the ‘Sword of Promised Victory’ Excalibur, then Arturia’s way of kingship would be broken and ended.

Rider’s Noble Phantasm had a strength such that even thinking about it would cause one to tremble all over. Even if Saber were to exert the strength of her own Noble Phantasm to the greatest extent, victory was not guaranteed.

The result of a showdown between an anti-army and anti-city Noble Phantasm was already beyond the capacity of human imagination. Emiya Kiritsugu would definitely think paying such a large price for victory to be a foolish course of action, and pay it only a perfunctory smile. But to Saber, the Holy Grail should be a thing to be fought for on the premise of sticking to one’s ideals. Since there was someone who threatened the basis of her kingship, it was definitely intolerable for Saber to even consider using methods that sidestepped this problem.

Only by assuring the way of kingship, which was the pride of the King of Knights, would the Holy Grail choose the King of Knights.

Precisely because of this, if Kiritsugu kept interfering as he did in the duel with Lancer, this Heaven’s Feel could be considered completely void for Saber.

Even if those despicable methods saw them through the final battle, Saber would definitely be unwilling to take the fruit of victory, the Grail.

If Rider were to set up a Reality Marble to protect his Master before carrying out battle, then the fight would not be interrupted. But Kiritsugu also understood Rider’s techniques. If he were to play any tricks before the activation of the Ionian Hetairoi…

Curling up, Saber sat on the chair and gritted her teeth. She felt very frustrated for not being able to read Emiya Kiritsugu’s intentions. She was facing a strong adversary and yet could not concentrate her full strength; it made her all the more apprehensive.

The bone-chilling north wind became even colder as she waited uneasily, leaving Saber even more anxious and unsettled.

※※※※※

Just as Saber feared, Emiya Kiritsugu was indeed there.

He was on the rooftop of a six-story apartment of a public housing estate across the street, approximately eight hundred meters from where she was.

Unlike the haphazardly arranged edifices, the rooftop of the apartment was structured somewhat strangely as it was unnecessary to think that residents would ever use it. Though it was somewhat difficult to enter, one could be disturbed only with difficulty once inside. One could not be seen, even from downstairs, after hiding behind the water tower; it was an excellent position for sniping or setting up an ambush.

Even the smoke and smell of tobacco could not be noticed here. To be able to enjoy to his heart’s content the vitality and energy that came with cigarettes—Kiritsugu’s mental burden here was much smaller than Saber’s.

The sniper rifle scope, propped on a tripod, was directed at the front door of the Mackenzie home.

And another specially prepared portable scope could clearly see Saber's every action as she sat in front of the bus stop.

It was fairly difficult to observe with two alternate scopes without break, but it was a situation that could not be helped since he was unable to rely on Maiya’s help. She had not managed to leave in the end because she had been entrusted with the job of guarding Irisviel. From this day on, ‘hunting’ adversaries could only be Kiritsugu's responsibility alone.

Kiritsugu had begun observing the Mackenzie house slightly later than Saber had; he saw that Saber, who could definitely feel the presence of Servants, was doing nothing, which indicated clearly that Rider was not at home at the moment—in which case the Master was definitely not around either. The Master was not bold enough to stay home alone under these circumstances. Once he discovered that the enemy’s Servant was pacing at the door, he would definitely summon Rider at once.

Kiritsugu was different from Saber; he took the situation, in which the targeted prey did not remain at the stronghold, more seriously than she did. They had left home the day after Kiritsugu learned of the existence of Glen Mackenzie's family and not

returned since; this timing was too precise to be a coincidence. Though there was no concrete evidence, there was still a relatively high chance that Waver Velvet had discovered the enemy's attack and fled in a hurry.

Nevertheless, Kiritsugu continued to wait there with a thread of hope, thinking that this was also an issue worthy of thought.

If Waver returned again to the Mackenzie house, it would definitely be necessary to blow up the house with a timed bomb. But if he had already fled, then he must have already found another stronghold, in which case the probability of his returning to this house was very low.

It looked like it would no longer be appropriate to use that old couple to lead Waver into a trap in the same way that he had used Sola as bait to lure Kayneth.

Kiritsugu held high regard for Waver's indifference to the fortress's security and choice in an ordinary household for his stronghold. In comparison to the Three Noble Families of the Beginning and Kayneth, who had built extravagant strongholds where they could easily be found, Waver's strategy was much better. It was difficult to conclude that a magus who could make this judgment would show sympathy for the household he was temporarily living in. To Waver, the Mackenzie couple was only a pair of pawns to be abandoned.

The impatience that came with wasting precious time and the taboo of acting with undue haste—these two thoughts crossed swords in Kiritsugu's heart.

On one hand, he had given up hope of Waver's return; on the other hand, he was unable to completely abandon the possibility that Waver's departure was only coincidence. The important reason for this was that it was very difficult to imagine that the young magus would actually be one step ahead of Kiritsugu in a battle of information.

From the beginning, Kiritsugu had never treated Waver, Master of Rider, as an opponent. Though he had later learned some of his background through additional investigation, he had only treated Waver Velvet as a novice magus who had become a Master by chance and made the conclusion that he was a layman no different from ordinary people who did not know magic.

Of course, Kiritsugu was not the sort of person that directly correlated ability with experience. Kiritsugu still remembered that he had already been a ruthless assassin when he made his debut, and he did not think himself a rare example.

But he had observed Waver Velvet's performance on the battlefield several times. Based on that, it was still very difficult to say if he could become a strong opponent capable of surpassing Kiritsugu.

Having never gotten an answer, at the time when he was beginning to feel an inexplicable anxiety…

Suddenly, intense pain burned at the base of Kiritsugu's little finger; his back stiffened.

"…?!"

When he had truly started treating Hisau Maiya as his assistant, Kiritsugu had put a spell on a strand of her hair and embedded it in the subcutaneous tissue of his little finger. At the same time, Maiya had also embedded a strand of Kiritsugu's hair in her finger. If the Magic Circuits of one of them entered a state of extreme stagnation—the stage at which one's life force was weak on the verge of impasse with death—the strand of hair given to the other person would burn, warning the other and notifying them of the existence of danger.

That was a measure implemented for a worst-case scenario in which it was already impossible to use a wireless network or familiar to convey information. That is to say, it was only a signal to inform that "it is already too late". For it to activate now, at this moment, what exactly could it mean…?

Before wavering, one must first be caught in a quandary. Kiritsugu mobilized all his neurons and began to ponder the situation at hand as well as to formulate response plans.

Maiya was on the verge of death—in other words, this meant that Irisviel, hidden in the underground storage, was in danger. The sequence of events and its cause could not be determined now.

Now, the absolute priority was to carry out help as soon as possible. The only method that could be chosen was the fastest—a miracle made possible by the Command Seals on his right hand.

"I order my puppet in the name of the Command Seals!"

Kiritsugu clenched his fist, at the same time reciting the spell as quickly as an automatic machine.

"Saber, return to the underground storage quickly! At once!"

The prana sleeping in one of the Command Seals carved on the back of Kiritsugu’s hand woke up and shone with light.

It was not an overstatement to say that Saber was very surprised.

She immediately understood that she had become the subject of some powerful magecraft. In the next instant, she was stripped of all recognition of the surrounding space and sent into the midst of a 'transfer' that did not have an existence or direction.

That was probably the legendary spell specifically meant to 'command Servants'. With an ultimate speed that neared destruction of the laws of cause and effect, she had already overcome the distance of space in a 'moment' of a few milliseconds at a speed close to that of light and completed the instantaneous movement between two different points in space.

Even so, she was indeed a sword-wielding Heroic Spirit of special conditioning. Though she had just been ‘transported’ from a chair beside a bus stop to a completely different place, the familiarity of the underground storage made her understand immediately that the strange phenomenon just now was caused by the activation of one of Kiritsugu’s Command Seals. In addition, some emergency must have occurred here that necessitated her immediate return to guard the headquarters. In the few milliseconds between the completion of the space break and her arrival on the floor of the underground storage, Saber had already completed the transformation from her disguise suit to her silver white armor.

Without question, the situation was clear at a glance.

The metal door had been broken down with brute strength. Irisviel, who should have been lying in the middle of the Magic Circle, had vanished; in her place was the body of Maiya, covered in blood, writhing and discarded.

“Maiya!”

Saber quickly ran to her side. She could not help but furrow her brow at the depth of her wounds. The injuries sustained in the Einsbern forest could not even begin to compare with this. What she sustained now were injuries that were fatal if not given emergency treatment as soon as possible.

As if feeling the Servant’s radiant presence, Maiya slowly opened her eyes.

“Sa…ber…?”

“Maiya, pull yourself together! I will bind these wound immediately. It’s all right—“

But Maiya pushed away the hand that Saber stretched out to her.

“Quickly… go after him, quickly, outside... Rider, he…”

“…”

If the Command Seal-induced voyage here had been surprising, Saber was even more surprised at Maiya’s reaction.

Maiya must already have known the extent of her injuries. She must have fully understood that she was on the verge of death. But compared to her own life, this silent assistant to an assassin cared more for the safety of the kidnapped Irisviel and was urging Saber to consider making Irisviel's safety the priority.

“But then—“

Just as she was about to ask a question in reply, Saber suddenly understood.

This woman was also a knight. Though different from her own proud expressions, this courage to abandon life for the duty she had taken up was precisely the chivalry that Saber so firmly believed in.

I must protect Irisviel in the underground storage until the last moment—Hisau Maiya had certainly already made an oath to Kiritsugu and Irisviel. To entrust Saber with that promise she could not carry out to the end, she was willing to lose her own life.

“I… it’s all right… very soon, Kiritsugu will come… so… you must, quickly…”

Saber gritted her teeth and shut her eyes.

Logically thinking, every minute and every second Saber wasted on worrying about Maiya was time in which the abducted Irisviel could be moving toward a hopeless situation.

The thread of hope that Maiya could be saved by Kiritsugu, who would quickly rush here, still remained. But the fate of Irisviel, who had been taken away, had no guarantee if Saber did not give chase immediately. According to the marks left behind in the underground storage, it was undoubtedly a Servant’s doing. The follow-up attack could only be carried out by another Servant—and that meant Saber.

“—Maiya, you must hold on till Kiritsugu arrives. I will bring Irisviel back safely.”

Maiya nodded, and shut her eyes as if reassured.

Saber made a new vow to continue Maiya’s own—there was no reason to hesitate further.

She ran out of the underground storage like a hurricane, leaping onto the roof in a single bound, and gazed into the darkened, faraway sky in search of the enemy’s figure.

Since it was a godspeed instantaneous transfer caused by a Command Seal, surely the attacker must not have left here very long ago. The enemy had not yet gone far. Even if she was unable to sense his presence, it was still possible to find him by sight alone.

Saber stood on the rooftop and scanned the surroundings with the supernatural vision of a Servant. She effortlessly caught sight of the enemy.

A distance of about half a kilometer… majestically standing on the roof of what looked like an apartment building of the business district.

A robust physique, curly, flame-colored hair, and a crimson mantle; it was undoubtedly Rider, King of Conquerors, Alexander, whom she had met many times before on the battlefield.

“It wouldn’t be—unless it really was Rider?!”

Saber still held a strand of suspicion regarding Maiya’s eyewitness statement.

That the King of Conquerors, whose name had been unyielding all this time, would employ such base methods—it was indeed difficult to believe. But his thickset hands were indeed holding up the unconscious form of Irisviel; the sight left no room for doubt. Though it was yet unknown how they had guessed Saber’s new stronghold, this was undoubtedly the Rider who had just now ambushed Maiya and critically injured her.

Rider showed himself openly as if luring the enemy to venture deep; he immediately turned and vanished to one side of the edifice immediately after meeting Saber’s gaze.

“Damn…!”

Saber took her stance and intended to continue pursuit, but her adversary was a Heroic Spirit of the Rider class—Saber could not help but purse her lips.

It would be easy to continue like this, leaping through the streets in pursuit. But that was assuming the other party was also traveling on foot like she was. If Rider fled on his Gordius Wheel, Saber would not be able to catch up no matter how fast her pace was.

But Saber also had the skill of Riding. Against a Noble Phantasm that could fly through the air to reach its destination, it was necessary to also utilize a long-distance cruiser that could surpass the mechanical energy of walking.

In the past, Saber would definitely have given up pursuit for lack of a way to catch up. But for better or for worse, the previous day, Maiya had given her a new ‘steed’.

With a deep gratitude to Kiritsugu’s foresight and meticulousness in preparing for every eventuality, Saber leaped to the ‘horse’, removing the prana armor that would only hinder her riding, and mounted the steed parked in the abandoned courtyard.

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Emiya Kiritsugu was very sensitive to the scent of Death.

Perhaps it was because he had witnessed the deaths of others countless times. Death could not be seen, nor could it be heard. Nonetheless, he could still sense the silent descent of something unknown at the moment when life was waiting to disappear from the corporal body.

The times when he felt the ‘joy’ of that thing were definitely times when he must watch, helplessly, someone else’s final moments, with their lives already beyond saving.

Therefore, Kiritsugu felt despair and gave up the moment he stood in the silent underground storage.

He would definitely be witnessing someone else’s death again at this place.

Holding on to the gun tucked in at his waist, he carefully crept into the underground storage, its iron doors already smashed. There was no killing intent or any other scent of danger. There was only the air with the stench of blood permeating through it; the heat of battle had already cooled down.

There was a little figure curled up on the floor; the sound of her breathing was almost too faint to be heard. Unmoving, its gradually cooling body temperature was surprisingly nostalgic.

Because he had always known this scene would appear sooner or later.

He had saved this girl’s life, but her heart had already been dead the moment she met Kiritsugu. This girl, who had fortunately remained alive after her baptism of bullets and gunpowder, felt not happy, but confused at her good luck.

She could no longer feel any meaning or joy in the fact that she was living as a human again.

So she would return the life that had been saved to the master who gave this gift of life to her – with her eyes closed, it almost seemed the girl was telling Kiritsugu that. It was a meeting eleven years ago.

Kiritsugu also accepted her conclusion as such.

He had known with a certain premonition that this girl would die in the near future. Kiritsugu had killed his own father and foster mother with his own hands. Therefore, he knew clearly that this girl standing beside him would soon also step onto the road of no return.

But even so, the more tools he could use the better. One day she would lose her value and be discarded; it would be a rather happy ending if she could actually manage to save the lives of two or more people… Kiritsugu gifted this girl with a name, a nationality, and taught her the skills and knowledge he possessed. That was the first beginning of Hisau Maiya, this person whose final destiny had already been decided.

Therefore, there was no need to sigh or feel loss here – this was the logical, unquestionable end.

He took Maiya's body into his arms. Slowly, she opened her eyes. Her empty gaze wandered around until she recognized Kiritsugu's face.

"…"

Not knowing what to say to her, Kiritsugu bit his lip in confusion.

Words of gratitude or comfort have no real effect. If he were to say anything with meaning to her at this moment, it would be to tell her the conclusion, 'you will die here'.

Tell her that she has no tasks left, no need to be troubled any more.

If he simply regarded her as a tool to be used, Kiritsugu would definitely be able to say those things.

"…"

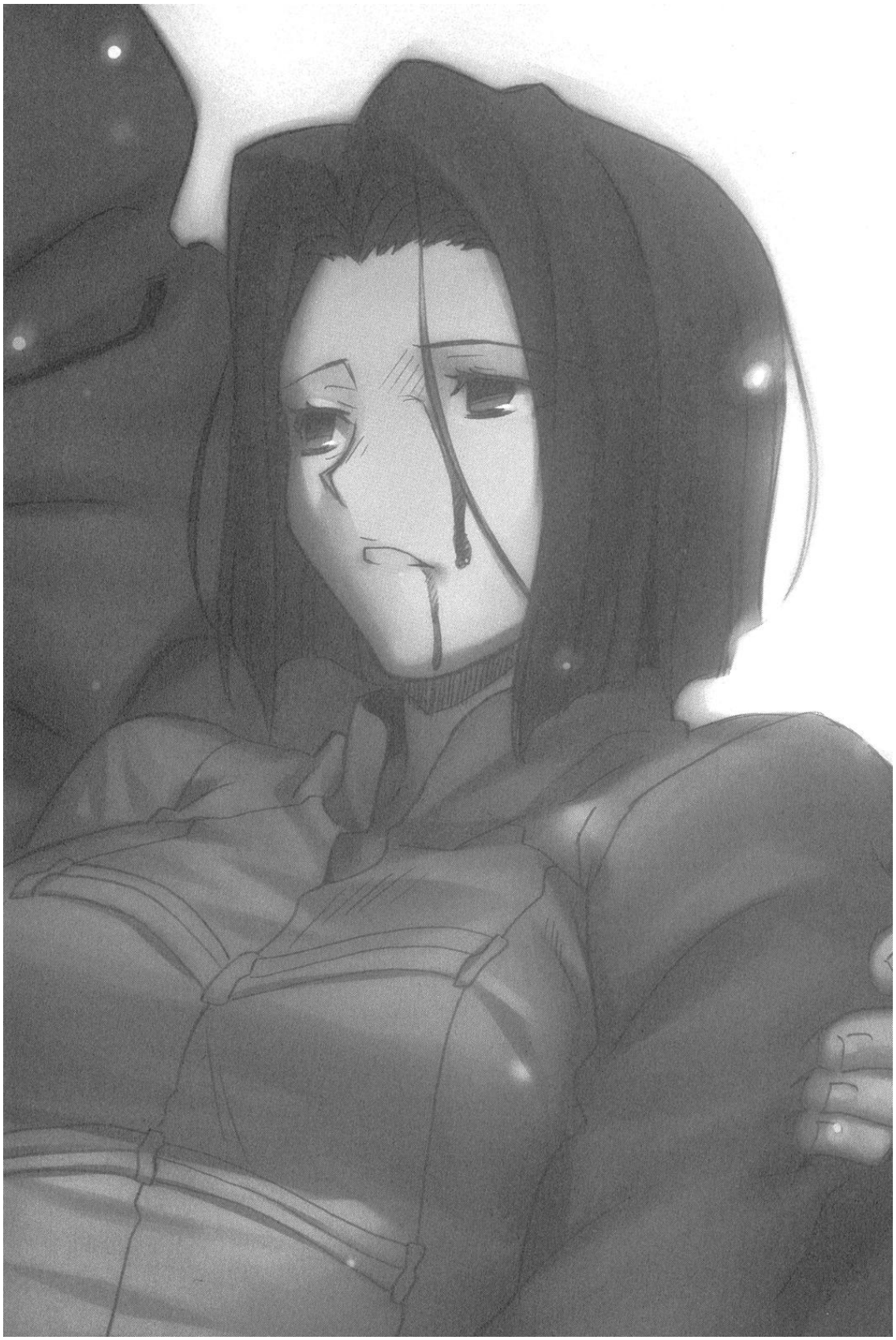
However, no sound could come out of his dry throat. He just stood there dazedly, his lips spasming.

"… No. You can't cry…"

"…"

Kiritsugu didn't notice the tears welling up in his eyes, threatening to fall out of the corners until Maiya pointed them out.

"You… need to save your tears for madam… if you cry here. No… you, are really weak. If you… start to cry now. No way…"



“I –”

He must have made some fatal error; Kiritsugu only felt that acutely now.

Functioning as a tool, thinking that even such a fate was acceptable at the end – just as Emiya Kiritsugu had always done, he had always thought the same of Hisau Maiya.

However, towards such a Kiritsugu, she spoke these words.

Shouldn’t there have been other ways for her to live or die?

“This morning. You finally… returned to the Kiritsugu of the past… if you waver over such a small matter. No…”

“–”

True. At this same place, he had embraced a different woman and understood the path he should walk in his life.

Just a moment’s wavering could overturn his belief.

The correct method could achieve an impossible miracle.

He reminded himself thus. It had been only half a day.

“ – Maiya, rest assured.”

Kiritsugu said in a suppressed voice as he stared into Maiya’s eyes, which were gradually losing their light.

“Trust Saber with everything. Maiya, your task… is complete.”

Although she had lost her value, the machine that was Emiya Kiritsugu still needed to keep functioning without error. Kiritsugu promised her that.

So there was no need for her to keep holding on.

No need to keep suffering pain, no need to keep thinking; she could let everything go.

Hearing this incompatibly cold declaration, Hisau Maiya softly nodded her head.

“Maiya…”

No reply.

No words of correction or refusal would ever be voiced again. What lay in Kiritsugu’s arms was already an ice-cold corpse.

Rider's escape was evidently in Shinto's direction.

Saber kept seeing Rider's back appearing on top of apartment buildings and billboards; perhaps it was because the latter was jumping from one vantage point to another. Maybe he did not deliberately hide his movements due to his total disregard for Saber's pursuing speed on foot.

If so, then he had excessively underestimated his enemy.

With completely opened throttle valves and Saber's rising fighting spirit, the ferocious two-wheeled beast let out a courageous roar. The rumbling of the V-style four-cylinder 1400cc engine was like that of an iron-cast lion – the crazed bellowing of the giant carnivore violently shook the silence of the night.

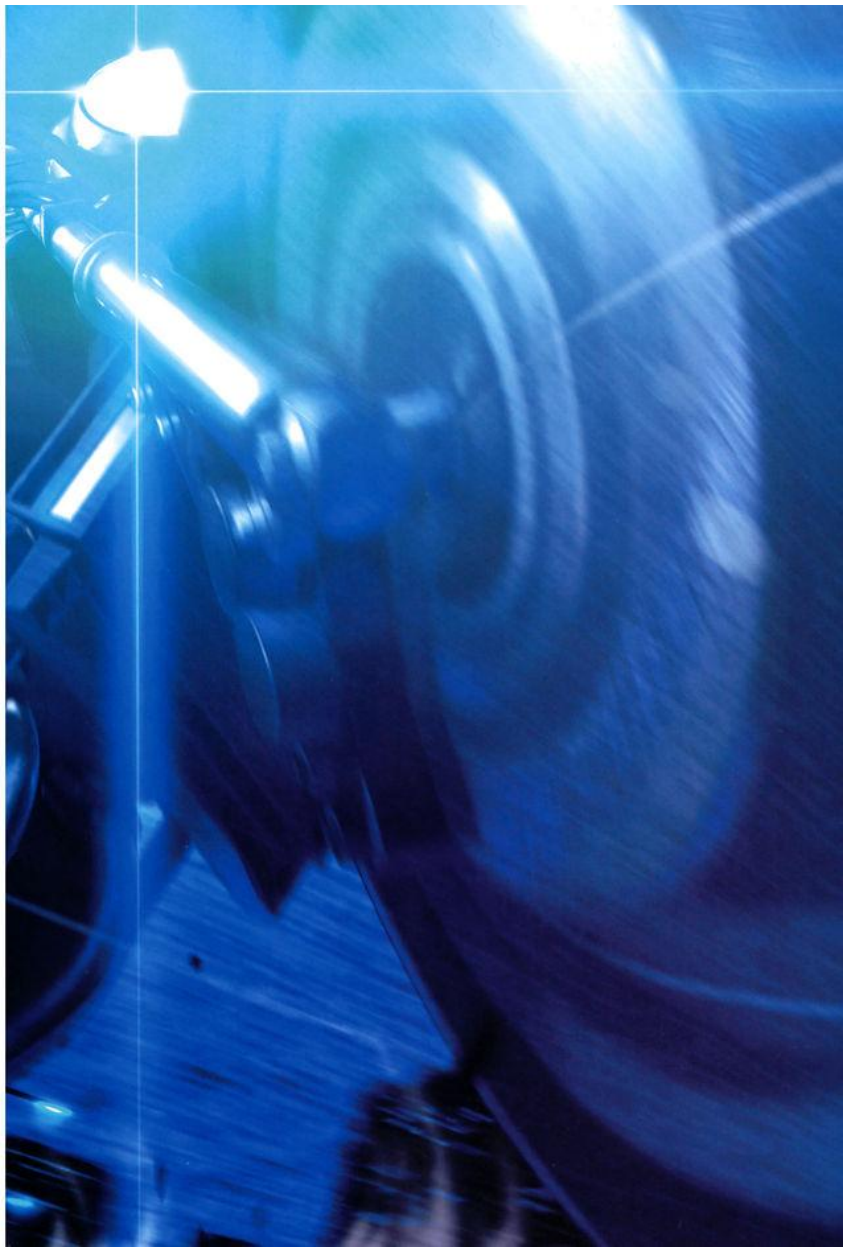
The mechanical tool Emiya Kiritsugu had prepared wasn't four-wheeled, but two-wheeled, perhaps to maximize Saber's Riding skill. Compared to 'controllable' automobiles, which had the driver in a seat while constrained by safety belts, it was easier to control balance if the driver became a part of the vehicle itself. A Servant's reinforced skills could only be maximized by 'Riding' a motorcycle, with the driver's body exposed to the elements outside.

Of course, provided that it would be used by a Servant, an existence beyond ordinary humans, it wouldn't matter if the motorcycle's functions ignored the limits of normal drivers. It was originally a ridiculously impractical and hypothetical motorcycle design, but Kiritsugu actually managed to make this design a reality.

The basic body of the motorcycle was the Yamaha V-Max, the most powerful in the modern world. The characteristics of the original 1200cc 140 Horsepower engine, which could already work near its limits, were strengthened again. Moreover, the acceleration system had been completely reinforced, making it a monstrous abnormality with an output equal to 250 Horsepower. That was the silver stallion Saber was now riding.

Of course, the two-wheeled design could no longer be expected to function properly after various extreme reinforcements. The wheels had too much torque and could not generate enough friction with the road; they could only keep turning. The front wheel would jump up whenever the brakes were applied and could throw off the driver immediately.

ベースとなった車体は現時点で最強のモンスターマシンとされるＹＡＭＡＨＡ・Ｖ・ＭＡＸ。元より一四〇馬力もの出力を叩き出す１２００ｃｃエンジンをさらにボアアップし、加えて吸気系やツインターボチャージャー、それに伴う駆動系の強化を全面的に施して、最終的に出力二五〇馬力を上回る異形の怪物へと変貌させられたソレが、いまセイバーの駆る白銀の騎馬だった。



Saber was steering this monstrous, physically uncontrollable steed perfectly and galloping at full speed. The secret to controlling this motorcycle so willfully lay in her battle skills, which she always took pride in, and the enormous power of her prana bursts. The prana burst throbbing out of Saber's back urged the crazed vehicle to race along the road, using its entire horsepower on acceleration.

Rather than using skill, it was more like using even more power to overwhelm the vicious beast. For Saber, who was short in stature, she could only control this 300-odd-kilogram, super heavily reinforced motorcycle in a precarious driving position. Saber was practically lying flat on top of the engine, which was covered by a plastic turbopump, and was forced to bear the powerful vibrations of the large engine while she held onto the steering. The pose was like a child desperately clinging onto the back of a beast.

However, this trial wasn't particularly painful for Saber. The more untameable this iron beast, the more excited and vigorous she felt.

The feeling she had when driving the Mercedes-Benz was nothing compared to this current feeling of breakneck gallop. Yes. This really felt like riding a horse.

Although she was driving a creation of modern technology, her spirit had already returned to memorable battlefields of the past – she had regained the spirit of chivalry from a time when she had held her lance and charged towards the enemy formation.

"If I keep up this speed, then maybe –"

The distance between her and Rider became larger. That was the difference between the paths of jumping on top of buildings and merely driving on roads.

However, there was no need to feel anxious. It was true that a Servant's dexterity was far above that of the V-Max in terms of maximum acceleration and maximum speed. However, this iron beast could maintain its speed as long as there was fuel left. If she was expecting a drawn-out pursuit, then the motorcycle would be very advantageous.

The streets of Miyama-chou were huge obstacles for the party pursuing on land. Moreover, this V-max, which had been completely revamped to achieve the ultimate acceleration, was not any different from those cars modified to compete in high-speed short and straight courses; it had almost no dexterity. However, a Servant's

superior skills overturned even the physical rule of ‘vehicles can’t turn corners at high speed’. This rule had no meaning before her.

Saber had completely mastered the machine’s characteristics. She didn’t slow down when she turned, but instead opened the throttle valves and poured all the excess torque into the back wheel. The moment the front wheel drifted up due to the intense acceleration and threatened to topple the turning vehicle sideways, Saber used the explosive force of prana bursts to forcibly tilt the vehicle to the side and complete the turn. It was like she was using a mighty and overwhelming blow to twist the direction of the vehicle.

Rider seemed to have passed Mion River and entered Shinto, and she couldn’t see his figure anymore. However, Saber did not panic, looking out over the night sky to search for the other’s whereabouts.

Rider should have known that Saber, who was already chasing him, wouldn’t give up easily. He currently could not turn into spiritual form to hide – not with Irisviel in his arms. There were only two choices for Rider once he entered Shinto. One was to hide somewhere to avoid Saber’s pursuit, and the other was to drag out the distance between himself and Saber using Gordius Wheel. Based on Rider’s personality, Saber believed he would choose the latter option. Therefore, she didn’t need to be anxious about losing him for the moment. The flying Noble Phantasm, Gordius Wheel, would emit large amounts of prana, and therefore wouldn't pass undetected by Saber.

"The problem is that it’s disadvantageous to follow on ground –”

It would be better if she could predict his destination as soon as she spotted Gordius Wheel and get there before him. Rather than a competition of driving skills, this was in fact a test of the pursuer’s sensitivity and hunting skills.

Everyone on the road was staring at this roaming V-Max that kept overtaking vehicles before it with a stunning speed. Saber completely ignored their looks and focused all of her concentration on the nemesis above her. She could detect obstacles blocking her path through changes in air flow. She wouldn’t hit anything even if she closed her eyes.

“– Found him!”

Saber’s senses, like the keen sight of a wild beast, detected the prana disturbances in the sky. As if to avoid being noticed by ordinary humans, Gordius Wheel did not

emit its thunderous noise, and its speed also appeared to have slowed. However, this feeling was undoubtedly caused by the prana disturbances created by Rider's Noble Phantasm.

The location was towards the east. He may have been planning to escape from Fuyuki through Shinto.

Saber thought he was probably pushing his luck. If so, she could fully exploit the machine's acceleration using the broad national highway.

After passing through the bridge in one go and arriving on the six-lane road, Saber bravely opened the throttle valves even wider and urged the V-max forwards.

Thanks to this reckless driver, the tachometer was already indicating over 6000 revolutions per minute – at that moment, the engine gave out a surprising sound.

The low rumbling sound of the engine, like that of angry waves, suddenly changed into a deafening and violent high-pitched noise. The sound was even madder, ferociously ripping apart the quietness of the night sky. The acceleration from just a moment ago was incomparable to what it was now.

The near-flight speed turned Saber and her motorcycle into a soaring bullet, and the surrounding night scene whooshed past like comets.

That was the moment when the true prana hiding within that iron beast woke. Being a design that utilized the most advanced modern technology, the structure of the V-style propelling mechanism, the four-cylinder design could immediately start to work as a two-cylinder design when the limit of engine rotation was reached and increase the amount of air sucked in to achieve an ultimate acceleration. This was the unique design of the V-max. Originally, a machine using two cylinders would never have such a structure, but this design had already completely surpassed the limits of a motorcycle.

As she endured the air friction that was starting to approach the force of water pressure, Saber hung on to the body of the motorcycle with all her strength - and yet couldn't help but give a peerless smile.

This motorcycle had already surpassed the basic rule of a machine; that is, the limit of 'machines are tools of men'. This was an alien creation born through advanced modern technology. That loneliness and sadness made her feel a similarity that surpassed sympathy.

Only an inhuman Servant could let this machine show its true worth. This motorcycle must have obtained life just for Saber to ride it that night.

“– Alright, then you can gallop until you burn yourself out!”

Saber roared loudly in the bellowing wind, and opened the throttle valves even wider.

The speedometer was already over 300 kilometers per hour, and it was still increasing slowly.

The brilliance of the flood lights no longer seemed like a light that belonged to the ground; it could almost illuminate the sky.

“Rider. Hey, she… couldn’t have caught up with us, right?”

Waver was the first to notice the situation and pointed under the driver’s seat with his hand. Rider gave a downward glance towards the direction his Master was pointing at and lifted his eyebrows, rather surprised.

“Huh? I was just wondering who it might be, and it turned out to be Saber. Then I can be saved of the trouble of finding her… Say, kid, are those motorcycles things that fast?”

“That’s… a motorcycle??”

Waver’s sight only registered it as a bright dot. That didn’t seem like the kind of motorcycle speed he could comprehend with his normal logic, even if he exhausted his entire brain.

“No, that’s impossible… however, it is definitely possible through Saber’s skills. If we think this way, then perhaps…”

“Hmph, she dares to challenge me, who possesses the mighty title of Rider.”

Rider gave off a ferocious smile as if satisfied.

“Haha, this is so interesting. Since she’s caught up with us, we don’t need to go into that weird forest anymore… If this is the case, then I’ll have one heck of a good fight with her.”

Rider grasped the divine bulls’ reins and suddenly slowed the war chariot’s speed.

“Hey, are we landing?!”

“I changed my mind. I have decided to battle that little girl with ordinary ‘wheels’. There’s still a long way to go to get through the forest in front of us, right? This will be the most ideal battleground!”

Waver originally wanted to complain about why he would want to give away his positional advantage in the sky and fall into Saber's trap. However, Waver remembered the power of Excalibur he had seen the day before yesterday. Based on the characteristics of Saber’s Noble Phantasm, the further away they were from her, the more dangerous it would get. It would probably be safer to have a close-range melee battle that could limit the destructive power of the enemy’s Noble Phantasm.

“Alright, then that’s decided. You should be careful!”

“Hahaha! Kid, you’ve finally understood the exquisite taste of battle. Don’t worry! Nothing in heaven and on earth can hinder me in my path!”

Fortunately, there were no ordinary vehicles on the national highway at the moment. Although the meandering tarmac mountain road wasn’t very suitable for battle, they didn’t need to worry about hurting innocent bystanders.

Gordius Wheel finally landed 200 meters in front of Saber, who was coming nearer and nearer, and proudly proceeded on the road to prepare for the ensuing attack from its challenger.

-36:44:26

From a building far away, three pairs of eyes watched Rider's flying Noble Phantasm as it appeared in the airspace above Shinto city, as well as Saber as she changed her route to pursue him.

One person's eyes expressed satisfaction. One pair of eyes was extremely fatigued. And one more person —could those eyes, filled with violent frenzy, still be said to belong to a human?

"I did not think that the real Rider would actually appear… This is truly a good show. Matō Kariya, you often bring luck to your companions on the battlefield."

Kotomine Kirei said this with a smile, in a tone that held a slight insinuation of sarcasm. At the same time, he slapped Kariya's shoulder to indicate admiration. Kariya's good right eye regarded him with suspicion.

"Father… do you think it is worth wasting two Command Seals on such a small matter?"

Kariya looked at his right hand, which was missing two Command Seals, with some dissatisfaction. Kirei said to him, smiling.

"There is no need to worry. Kariya, as long as you are willing to help me, you need not worry about wasting Command Seals—come, stretch out your hand."

Kirei caught hold of Kariya's veined and withered right hand, softly chanting a spell while tracing the mark of the Command Seals with his own hand. At his small ministration, the darkened Command Seals immediately regained their light and returned to the previous shape of three marks.

"You… really—"

"Did I not already tell you? Kariya. I accepted the duty of Supervisor, so I have the right to redistribute the Command Seals in safekeeping of the Church at will.

"…"

Kariya was unable to surmise the other's true intentions; he regarded Kirei unabashedly, then glanced with a sigh at his own Servant.

The large silhouette standing behind him was Rider, King of Conquerors, Alexander. Whether it was the crimson mantle or the curly red hair, or the burly physique—everything was the same as the driver of the chariot that had sped out of Fuyuki City

with Saber. The only difference was the pair of eerie, blood-red eyes radiating resentment… Undoubtedly, this was a characteristic unique to a Mad Enhanced Servant.

Wrapped in his thickset arms was the slender body of Irisviel, who had lost consciousness and was still in a coma. This ‘Rider’ was the true culprit who had kidnapped the ‘Guardian of the Holy Grail’ from the underground storage that Maiya protected, and had also lured Saber to give chase toward Shinto.

“… That is enough, Berserker.”

Kariya nodded. The large body of the King of Conquerors turned into a pitch-black fog as if burnt, then reverted to the armored figure filled with an ominous air. The dark energy that imitated Rider’s appearance twined about his hands and legs, obscuring small parts of the black armor.

Seeing Berserker returned to his original form, Kirei said as if groaning.

“This sort of transformation ability… It is truly wasted as a Noble Phantasm of Berserker’s level.

“This guy initially had the ability to transform into many other Heroic Spirits that had won merit in military exploits for other people. Because of the Mad Enhancement, it has been reduced to the ability of ‘imitation’.”

The black fog that twined about Berserker’s entire body was originally a Noble Phantasm that had the purpose of not only hiding his visage, but also of mimicking any person in order to deceive enemies’ ears and eyes. Ever since Berserker had been stripped of his rationality, this ability could not be brought into play. Kariya had forced this ability to manifest through the power of the Command Seals and made it possible to disguise Berserker as a fake Rider. But this ability could only be used once.

“Ar… ur…”

Berserker stared after the light of Saber’s motorcycle headlights moving gradually further away into the east, his gaze full of hatred. A bone-deep hatred caused his shoulders to shake ceaselessly, the armor chafing with a creaking sound, but he did not do anything else out of the ordinary. That was due to the binding of the ultimate command, the second Command Seal that Kariya had used—“capture Irisviel, and let Saber escape”.

In order to make Berserker, who had an unusual stubbornness when it came to Saber, follow his own instruction, it was necessary to restrict him with a forceful command.

For Berserker, it appeared that those shackles were extremely difficult to endure. Although his task was now complete, the black knight seemed like a mechanical part that had malfunctioned; his limbs continuously convulsed, stubbornly resisting this command.

Kariya felt a chill run down his back at Berserker's willfulness. As Berserker fell into a state of uncontrollability, Kariya forcefully cut off the prana connection with him. Having lost the prana that sustained his form in this world, the Servant immediately reverted to spirit form and the body of Irisviel, losing its support, was violently thrown to the rooftop floor. On impact, the sleeping homunculus gave a soft groan of pain, but nevertheless did not open her eyes. Since being forcefully kidnapped from the Magic Circle in which she had rested, Irisviel's awareness had become even thinner.

"Is this woman really the 'Vessel of the Holy Grail'?"

"To be precise, it is this homunculus. If one or two more Servants are finished, then it will probably show its true form… I will prepare the ritual to receive the Grail as it descends. Until that time, let this woman also be temporarily under my protection."

The robed man picked up the weak body of the woman; Kariya wordlessly communicated his question with his eyes.

Kirei noticed his gaze and replied as before, with a leisurely and self-satisfied smile.

"Don't worry. I will give you the Grail as per our agreement. Because I have no need to pursue that wish-granting machine."

"Before that, you seem to also have promised me another thing, Father."

"Ah, that thing… Of course there is no problem. You just have to come to the church at midnight tonight. I will make the preparation for you to meet Tōsaka Tokiomi then."

"…"

Exactly what did this priest intend? — It made Kariya's heart very troubled to not be able to discern his true intention all this time.

Though Kotomine Kirei had once been a disciple under Tōsaka Tokiomi, for the sake of participating in the Heaven's Feel he had split ways and become a Master— a hypocrite. But from the perspective of the Matō family that had also participated in

the previous Heaven's Feel, the collusion between the Tōsaka house and the Church had long been known. In this case, it was also obvious without needing to be said that this son of the Supervisor, who was also an Executor of the Church, had summoned Assassin as Tokiomi's lackey.

At noon today, Kirei had actually come running all of a sudden to knock on the door of the Matō house, saying that he hoped to discuss the establishment an alliance. According to him, the responsibility for Supervisor Kotomine Risei's death fell on Tōsaka; as the man's son it was necessary for him to avenge his father, and so he wished to use the hand of the Matōs to kill Tokiomi.

Although Kariya knew that this intention was suspicious, the conditions laid out by Kotomine Kirei were truly too alluring to him.

This man had not only planned to trap Tokiomi, but also investigated the location in which Einsbern, protector of the 'Vessel of the Grail', was hiding and secretly succeeded the right to safekeep the Command Seals as Supervisor; it could be said that he held the most important trump card to the latter half of the Heaven's Feel.

To Kariya, holding the ticking time bomb known as Berserker, isolated and unable to trust even his own kin, Kirei's assistance was greater than an army of thousands; his heart was immediately grounded. However, the condition was that he had to trust everything that this man Kotomine Kirei said.

Kotomine Kirei could ensure that the homunculus of the Einsbern family was in his hands. He even generously replenished his consumed Command Seals… But even thus, Kariya was unable to completely trust this priest whose smile surfaced as leisurely and self-satisfied.

The attitude of this man was truly too relaxed. Perhaps it was due to the confidence brought about by the secret he held, which was the most important deciding factor. But if he were only to look at it thus simply—that indicated that he had no sense of danger in the face of battle, or a sense of anxiety in needing to consider tactics.

If it were absolutely necessary to describe, that smile was closer to that of an excited child playing a game. In the name of betraying his benefactor to avenge his father, this man had formed an alliance with him. It was very obvious that this man found great joy in this sort of situation…

"It will be too suspicious if both of us appear at the same time. Kariya, why don't you go back first?"

“… And you?”

“I still have some small things to do… Don’t forget, Kariya. Tonight at midnight, your wish shall be accomplished there.”

The priest seemed to be even more concerned over the whole affair than Kariya himself, reminding Kariya again in a voice filled with anticipation.

Kariya once again regarded his smile with a suspicious gaze, then slowly turned around and walked toward the rooftop staircase.

Without the slightest carelessness, Kotomine Kirei listened closely to his ally’s footsteps moving into the distance. After confirming that the sound of footsteps had entirely disappeared—he again moved to a corner of the rooftop and shifted his gaze to a pile of discarded material covered by many sheets of water-resistant material.

“… I have already sent him away. I don’t know who you are, but isn’t it about time you revealed yourself?”

This voice carried an authority that did not permit compromise. After a period of silence, a hair-raising and suppressed laughter rang out, seeping into the icy night air.

“Oh, already noticed, have you? Indeed, you are worthy of being an Executor who has experienced battle. Much more sensitive than that kid Kariya."

From the darkness appeared a shadow without definite form. At first glance Kirei had even thought that it was a large pile of worms, a collection that would send a chill through anyone—but the bright moonlight immediately chased away this misconception; it was an old man, thin and small of stature, that quietly walked out.

“Executor, you have no need to worry. I am not your enemy. I am the kin of that kid who is cooperating with you.”

Since he named himself thus—in Kirei’s heart surfaced a suitable person.

“Matō Zōken… is it not?”

“Indeed. You even know my name. It seems that Tōsaka instructs his disciples well.”

The old magus quirked a corner of the lips deeply hidden in wrinkles, revealing an inhuman smile.

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The thickness of the darkness spread about the mountain road was already incomparable to that of evening; it seemed that it was already night.

In the darkness that was black as ink, you would not see your hand in front of your face. The brilliance of the headlights ripped apart this patch of darkness. Saber was still driving the steel beast as if her life depended on it.

She had traveled this path when escorting Einsbern out of the city. When they had left, it had been Irisviel driving; returning, it was Saber who tightly gripped the steering wheel of the Mercedes-Benz, sure of the road. Though it was only two times that they had come and gone, it was enough for Saber. Her memory was above average; be it the width of the road or the angle of inclination or even when to make a turn, she could clearly recall it all.

Saber saw that Rider's 'Gordius Wheel' had only just descended from high in the air and landed somewhere far away. For some unknown reason, the King of Conquerors had not continued to flee, but had landed on the ground, seemingly intending to respond to Saber's challenge of having a competition of riding skills on the ground.

His air of heroism seemed not to be miscible with his sneak tactic of kidnapping Irisviel, but perhaps this was exactly the conflict between Rider and his Master. The actions of Servants restricted by the contract often brought about many contradictory results; this was not surprising.

This was exactly the personal experience that Saber herself had gained through her conflict with Emiya Kiritsugu.

It made Saber very happy that Rider could make a decision based on his own agenda in this final battleground. Between these two fast-moving riders, Kiritsugu had no way of interfering even if he wanted to. To Saber, this was something she wanted very much.

The key of the problem lay somewhere else—the vibration of the handlebars she was tightly gripping sent a message of danger.

As a man-made machine, the V-MAX had already fully manifested all of its ability. What was sad was that what was driving ahead was a quick-moving Noble

Phantasm that transcended normality. Although the V-MAX was already being towed along by its rider Saber's internal prana, the strength of its material composition and structure was definitely limited.

The engine and acceleration system, which from the city to here had been continuously used to their greatest capacity, were already showing signs of breaking down. Saber's excellent driving allowed her to be aware of this vehicle's internal situation as well as she would have known an extension of her own physical body. It was already possible to clearly hear the dejected cry of almost having reached its limit.

"It'll be terrible if this goes on…"

There would be nothing more to say if she were to decelerate in consideration of the vehicle's burden, but if it were necessary to force the motorcycle to continue at its high speed, this vehicle would fall apart within a few minutes. If no measures were taken to strengthen the innate capability of the vehicle…

Saber herself had difficulty judging the feasibility of the plan that had momentarily flashed into her mind, but there was no way to hesitate further. Saber made up her mind and entrusted everything to all the possibilities that had been given to her as a Servant.

The full-body platinum armor that she wore while fighting— she now intended not to put the armor on her own body, but to fuse it with the body of the V-MAX through intense psychokinesis. The concept was similar to the armor that protected beloved horses on the battlefield. With the sense of unity of riding as the mainstay, this time she must definitely turn this steel beast that could not speak into her own limbs…

Her prana continuously being released, the various important parts of the V-MAX that could ensure maximum speed of movement were completely covered and protected; the flexible and strong armor increased the capability of the motorcycle.

"—This is great!"

Though this usage was unexpected, Saber's great skill made this difficult task possible. The entire structure of the V-MAX was wrapped in brand-new silver armor, beautiful and majestic to behold. This hard structure of the vehicle was in no way inferior to that monstrous, extraordinarily strong horsepower; this time, the mechanical lion had finally become a real magical beast. The exhaust pipe thundered.

Saber released the Invisible Air like an arrow directly in front of her, completely covering the body of the vehicle. Using the compression of the pneumatic umbrella to decrease air resistance to zero, the V-MAX was finally released from air resistance.

The needle of the speedometer was already damaged and could not be used. Saber's prana had caused the rushing vehicle to transcend the laws of physics; already the speed was more than 400 kilometers per hour. The pressure released by the magecraft pressed the rear wheel firmly against the cement; even when making turns, Saber did not release the throttle and turned the body of the vehicle round by force.

Like this, it might even be possible— it made Saber extremely excited to have captured this thread of victory through so much effort.

The distance from the 'Gordius Wheel' in front gradually shortened. Originally it had looked like only a point of light, but now it was already possible to clearly see the entire likeness of the thundering vehicle that was releasing lightning bolts and also turning at high speeds.

On the other side, Waver, who had been sitting in the charioteer's seat since having touched down, was constantly watching the rear. Seeing the brilliance from the headlights of the motorcycle that was suddenly approaching, he could not help but hold his breath; he tugged at Rider's cape.

"Rider, at this rate they will catch up to us! Eh, idiot, look out behind!"

Hearing Waver's frantic voice, Rider snorted. As a Heroic Spirit who had appeared in this world and gained the throne of Rider, even without turning back he could clearly feel the presence of Saber gradually closing in.

"This fellow, Saber. On the account that she can catch up just using that gizmo, I cannot but praise her. On the other hand…"

Rider roared, the corner of his lips twisting, showing the smile that had always seemed somewhat sinister.

"Sorry, but this is a war chariot. Now I can no longer play nicely in this game of competing speeds with you!"

Then Rider slid the enormous structure of the car to the side, arriving at the side of the road.

On the two sides of ‘Gordius Wheel’ whose dimensions were greater than an ordinary truck were fixed two large, fiercely curved sickles. On the two sides of the national highway on which Rider was now speeding were dense forests that almost covered the path. If the wheels of the chariot were moved to the very edge of the paved road, then the blade of the sickle would definitely pass into the lush green forest—

“So, Saber, pursue me from behind!”

The electrified wheels of the chariot crushed the forest as easily as if it were cutting through paper; Rider had begun a brutal deforestation.

Though the tree trunks were all very thick, for the sharp sickles flying at 400 kilometers an hour, it was as easy as sawing wood. The tree trunks that had been instantaneously broken all snapped back and were swept into the air. The sight was like shredding wood shavings, only it was a nightmare a few hundred times more majestic.

Seeing this tremendous scene of destruction, Saber could not help but hold her breath.

“Damn it…!”

The trees that had been swept up into the air descended like rain upon their target, which was obviously the head of Saber who was catching up from behind. To say nothing of being directly hit—at this speed, even if the steering wheel should be gently brushed across, it would be a matter of life and death.

Deceleration—was impossible. This was not a test that could be avoided just by retreating. The only path of survival was to rush on forward.

Saber made up her mind; after making thorough mental preparation, she rushed into the rain of continuously falling trees without any timidity whatsoever.

These things fell toward the ground like an avalanche. The V-MAX advanced forward in a twisting manner like a snake, passing through narrow spaces. Saber thought that braking to make the motorcycle stop was an act of stupidity, so not only did she not decelerate, she also made use of the momentum from acceleration to make the front wheel leave the ground, relying only on the rear wheel to maintain balance and performing the consummate stunt of controlling the driving of a motorcycle using magecraft alone. That beautiful one-wheeled dance incited Waver

to stare, completely forgetting his fear; on Rider's face also appeared a very satisfied smile.

"Hahahahaha! Fabulous! Indeed the King of Knights of consummate dignity! Only you are worthy to be named flower of the battlefield!"

Laughing, Rider continued to deftly slide the chariot from side to side, closing in on the next object to be cut down.

"Here I come again—next up after the trees is a rain of stones!"

The next prey of the sickles was surprisingly the solid asphalt and concrete that covered the surface of the road. Rock had a density and hardness much greater than tree trunks. But the sickles nevertheless mercilessly crushed them to rubble, sending them flying in all directions like droplets, blocking Saber's way.

A fatal baptism of rocks much more lethal than tree trunks. But— Saber stared ahead, moving forward bravely, the corners of her mouth suddenly showing an undefeatable smile.

"King of Conquerors, you underestimate me!"

Rocks were more dangerous than tree trunks only when first assuming that they must 'hit'. If she could dodge it all, then it would make no difference even if it were raining rockets or bullets. Saber entrusted the last hope of victory to the V-MAX which she completely trusted, using valiant and yet beautifully skilled riding ability to pass through the gaps between the stone and concrete.

On the other side, sweeping the surface of the road with its large sickles, Rider's war chariot had already lost its ability to accelerate. The concrete was much more difficult to cut through than tree trunks and was an obstructing force to the divine bulls, one that could not be overlooked.

Saber's sixth sense predicted the arrival of a divine opportunity for victory. From then on, the priority was to pass through the next few successive tests safe and unharmed; there would definitely be a chance to rise again from death— A large concrete slab that had broken off the surface of the road obstructed the path of the V-MAX. The large flat stone slab, measuring more than two meters in both length and breadth, was just like a stone screen.

Facing the blocked path right ahead of her, Saber's gaze was unwavering; driving the V-MAX forward, she raised Invisible Air over the edge.

“Chaaaaaarge!!”

Along with her roar, the clump of air pressure—which had the momentum to sweep away an army of thousands and was supported by the release of prana – impacted heavily on the top of the stone slab; the slab, which looked as if it must weigh at least several tons, was easily flung into the air. It completely defied the laws of physics that the slender wrist of a young girl could carry out such a grand feat; this was the godly skill transcending normalcy that only a Servant could possess.

Spinning rapidly in midair, the stone slab fell forward along the fatal parabola, aligned exactly with the top of the war chariot in front. Hearing Waver’s terrible scream, Rider turned his head. Raising his sword, he stared wide-eyed at the rock over his head.

“AAAAAAAAAH!”

As if saying ‘In a competition of strength I will definitely not lose to you’, Rider boldly brandished the bronze sword level with the stone slab. The slab’s trajectory was once again changed, spinning even more wildly in midair. At last it fell down like a boomerang, embedding itself deeply in the surface of the road behind the chariot.

Seeing this scene, Saber’s entire body was electrified by a revelation.

The concrete slab embedded into the asphalt road surface—the smooth side facing the sky, it was embedded diagonally into the ground at an angle of slightly more than thirty degrees. It was like a key that foretold the presence of victory.

“Now is a good time—“

Under the thumb of her right hand, which was tightly gripping the steering wheel, was a button that she had always been acutely conscious of. Saber drove the V-MAX with extraordinary riding skill; though she did not know that button’s ‘function’, she did know that button’s ‘effect’. That was the deepest secret hidden within this horse of steel, and also the most powerful trump card.

Without the slightest hesitation, Saber pressed down on the red button; the two-wheeled beast let out a provoked roar.

Within the interior of the rapidly rotating engine, inside the valve that had switched to atomization mode and filled with oxide fuel, the nitrogenous oxide expanded under the high temperature of 300 degrees Celsius and reached the boundaries of its limit.

The V-MAX, suddenly increasing acceleration twofold, sped forward; this could only be called rapid acceleration. Saber used a great deal of strength to control the body of the vehicle; her target was a slope that had just appeared before her eyes.

The front wheel had already moved onto the concrete slab which was giving out creaking sounds resembling screams. Then the body of the vehicle was propelled upward; the force of the madly spinning rear wheel suspended it in the air. Even the restriction of gravity had been broken, as it flew high into the air—

To Rider, this was definitely a surprise attack that he had not anticipated. Complacently flying his Noble Phantasm in midair, he had not at all expected that the enemy would appear right above his head.

Taking advantage of the lapse as the chariot slowed, due to a great acceleration from the V-MAX's turbocharger, as well as having made a springboard of the slope that had come about only through coincidence, Saber found Rider's weak spot at last.

And this position above the enemy's head was one of absolute advantage in crossing blades. This was indeed the grace of the goddess of victory given to the sword-wielding Heroic Spirit; this time was a chance of certain victory.

"Die, Rider!"

Invisible Air, which had been lifted as if she gambled everything with this one blow — slowed slightly with hesitation at that time.

Rider raised his own blade to block. The blades that clashed together—considering only power, Saber should have had a greater chance of victory due to the advantage of her position; however, the outcome was an even match. Invisible Air could not break past Rider's defenses, and had at last been deflected away.

There was no opportunity for the swords to clash again, not between Gordius Wheel and the V-MAX which had fallen. Saber let off the speed that had been increased by the instantaneous prana release, sustaining the balance of the vehicle in midair only with great difficulty; as the rear wheel touched the ground, all the force of impact was absorbed by the rubber tire and suspension.

Thus was an excellent opportunity to seize victory lost in vain, but Saber's unease was for another reason.

"Einsbern is not here?!"

There was no mistake. In the instant that the V-MAX had leaped, she had seen that in the charioteer's seat of Gordius Wheel, aside from the driver Rider there was only his Master.

In that case, then where had Irisviel, who had been kidnapped from the underground storage, gone?

Saber braked with all her strength, restraining the vehicle that weighed more than 300 kilograms. The tires skidded on the surface of the ground, stopping the violent revolutions of the two wheels. All this time, she had pursued Rider without the slightest hesitation, but now the clouds of doubt surfaced in her chest.

Exactly where was Rider's destination as he moved?

From the city street he had moved east to pass through the national highway… His final destination was the Einsbern forest.

Rider had already walked this path once, holding a bottle of wine. After kidnapping Irisviel, why would he specifically choose an escape route that led to the enemy's territory?

Feeling a chill that made her restless, Saber gritted her teeth.

What if this was not an escape?

And how would the Master of Rider have known about the underground cellar at Miyama—yes, it was basically impossible for him to have known. Rider's camp had not in fact known that the Einsberns had changed their location. He had definitely thought that Saber and the rest had still been in that forested citadel, and so had, in the middle of the night, driven his chariot in midair in a blind rush there.

In that case, then who was it that had attacked Maiya and kidnapped Irisviel in the underground storage?

The truth was still unclear, but now an intense premonition rushed forth into Saber's heart that she had been tricked. That feeling made her restless. While Saber had been pursuit Rider, the culprit that had set Rider up might be fleeing with Irisviel even now.

She could not stay here any longer. She needed to return to Shinto as quickly as possible to search for Irisviel.

And yet—though this judgment was entirely accurate, Saber did not move. There was a tense aura about her body, like the rising wind that heralds a coming storm;

no useless action was allowed. She gazed upon the danger before her eyes, taking her stance and preparing to go all out at any time.

About a hundred meters away, Rider's chariot also slowed to a stop. And it had reversed the direction that it was facing, too. All this time, it had moved straight forward to let Saber trail in its dust, but now it actually turned around; the eyes of the two divine bulls, as well as their master the King of Conquerors, were filled with a feeling of the joy of battle; he looked upon Saber with a captivating gaze.

There was no need to guess. Rider's intentions were very obvious—he intended to fight.

From his eyes could not be seen the slightest shadow of deception or scheming; he had truly been set up. The fires of rage burned in the eyes of the King of Conquerors as if demonstrating his might and saying 'No matter how you may stab me, I will return it in equal measure'.

If Rider had moved east because he had the intention to challenge Saber, then his situation was different from that of Saber who had been led into a trap; he was in no way opposed to the current situation.

Precisely because of this, if she were to ignore the problem of Rider and return to Fuyuki City, this would mean that she would be victim to Rider's attack from behind while she was completely unprepared.

She could only make an immediate decision now—it was a moment with no room to choose, in which she must quickly make her choice.

The small hands of hers that gripped the hilt of her sword suddenly gave out a creaking sound.

Waver huddled on the charioteer's seat of the Gordius Wheel; he could feel that the fighting spirit of Rider, who stood beside him, had already reached its peak.

The target of the King of Conquerors was definitely ahead of him by a hundred or so meters: Saber, riding on the large motorcycle, staring in this direction with a serious expression.

She had chased Rider fervently from Shinto till here; why would she suddenly stop now? But Rider, upon seeing that his pursuer had stopped, did not take the opportunity to flee and widen the distance, but instead immediately turned the chariot around and pull it to a halt, as if intending to have a face-to-face

confrontation. It stood to reason that this was a matter of course. Because to have a showdown with Saber had been Rider's intention from the start. If the other had given up the pursuit, then it would be necessary for this side to take the initiative.

But—although Waver was not yet very mature, he still bore the burden of being a Master; feeling restless and uneasy, he could not help but bite his lip.

This distance, and this position, was all terrible.

Saber's Noble Phantasm, which had taken the life of Caster at Mion River—ever since witnessing the 'Sword of Promised Victory', the war situation in front of him was clear at a glance. This was a straight road that was not obstructed by anything. There was no worry that unrelated people could be affected. Both sides were still as they stared at each other—without a doubt, the current situation was a uniquely advantageous condition for Saber's Noble Phantasm.

Small things of this magnitude would not have gone unnoticed by war veteran Rider. He had also witnessed the might of Saber's Noble Phantasm at Mion River. Although his judgment was more often based on emotion than reason, in matters of war strategy, this Servant would definitely not judge wrongly.

If, at this moment, the mechanical energy of the Gordius Wheel had been manifested at the largest capacity possible, perhaps it would have even been possible to evade for a time. But for some unknown reason, Rider just had to abandon the advantage he had in leg power and choose instead to confront Saber directly.

"Hey, Rider…"

"Nn. Even if it is to you, my Master, I must first make this clear."

As if seeing through Waver's doubt, Rider surfaced an irrepressible smile; nevertheless, his gaze never shifted from Saber as he said to the youth beside him.

"From now on, I will put aside my thoughts of winning the Grail; I intend to raise the stakes. If you wish to use a Command Seal to stop me, then perhaps now is the time?"

"…"

Because he knew the haughty personality of this Servant, he could understand his intention.

A rational Master would definitely use the power of the Command Seal to stop him; the Servant himself knew this well, too, but he wished to act recklessly anyway. Was this the case?

“You… are you really going to initiate the attack? From this angle? Rush straight over?”

“That sword of light that we saw at the riverside. When Saber has taken her stance and is preparing to use it, we shall see if my Gordius Wheel can use the time lapse to cross this distance. This is what we are contesting.”

Waver’s expression changed drastically; he began to recalculate the distance between both sides.

It would be just in time; this was so alarmingly dangerous.

Comparing the time he remembered it would take Saber to activate her Noble Phantasm and the acceleration power of Rider’s Noble Phantasm... No matter what angle he looked at it, it was very difficult to guess at the final result. The distance across which the two confronted each other was really very opportune.

“… How sure are you of victory? Rider?”

“About half.”

The King of Conquerors replied with a dignified air, in a tone that was nevertheless very relaxed. To one who managed military affairs, this statistic was not in fact very optimistic.

If the chance of victory was half, then the chance of failure was also half. It was as absurd as flipping a coin to decide between life and death. This sort of thing was definitely not worth being called a ‘strategy’. If one absolutely had to name it something, then it could only be called ‘the stratagem of gambling with one’s life’. Only under conditions in which there was no other way out would one adopt such foolish action.

“Why do you want to… act irresponsibly like this?”

“Precisely because it is acting irresponsibly, therefore.”

The Servant said softly, showing a somewhat sinister smile; his eyes were filled with the belief in victory— while gazing fixedly upon an uncertain future of which he was only fifty percent assured.

“If a challenge is made under conditions like this when both sides are evenly matched, then the side that loses will definitely be left with no excuses or face. This is the true ‘ultimate defeat’. I don’t actually think that that the sword of that girl who’s always trying to show off her cleverness can use this opportunity to bring me down. If I can completely defeat her in this way, then perhaps this time she will feel fear at her own incompetence, and from then on become my subordinate and serve me.”

“…”

Waver furrowed his brow; he could only sigh. There were truly no words that could be said.

In the end, it was only thus. Compared to the war centered around the Holy Grail, they placed even greater importance on the open and aboveboard competition between themselves as Heroic Spirits.

“…You... want to win against Saber so much that you are willing to do something like this?“

“Mn, indeed, I would like that very much.”

Rider nodded his head without the slightest hesitation.

“On the battlefield, she is certainly a star on earth. Rather than letting her make those jokes about whether or not she is actually an ideal king, it is better that she emit true light as a subordinate under me.”

This despot had defeated countless nobility and war generals; ignoring their power and wealth, he had obtained their ‘souls’.

It was for this reason that people called him the King of Conquerors.

He did not eliminate the enemy, nor belittle them; he subdued a standing opponent—this was what he thought was the true form of victory.

What right had one who relied only on the Grail to connect and establish a contract to be concerned with whether this was right or wrong?

“… Forget it, Rider. If you can win by your methods, then that’s okay too.”

Waver had given up; exhaling frustratedly, he threw out such a sentence.

This was not a case of sending the helve after the hatchet. To Rider, whose prana had been replenished through a day of rest, this was an excellent opportunity to make a challenge; it was an opportunity that would definitely not come again. No

one could guarantee that the next time he confronted Saber, his physical condition would be better than this.

In that case, instead of believing in a statistical chance of victory, it was better to place his bet on Rider's fighting spirit.

Compared to attempting to convince the King of Conquerors through logical reasoning, it was better to let him do things on his own grounds—it was precisely that transcendent personality that was afraid of neither heaven nor earth that perhaps formed a chance of victory one could believe in.

Waver's expression was serious, as if having said these many reasons in order to convince himself. Rider maintained a confident smile.

"Hehe, kid, you seem to be starting to understand this idea of 'supremacy'."

His confidence was not hollow. Though he had said that it was a large gamble, Rider himself had full confidence in his victory.

"Light is at the other end of the world—conquer! Via Expugnatio: Distant Trampling Domination!"

The true name of that which had finally been released, the chariot drawn by divine bulls from which lightning suddenly burst forth. The majestic braying of the divine bulls under whose feet Berserker had been trampled in the first battle could never compare to this.

"—Let the wind come!"

Seeing her opponent rush towards her, Saber also hurriedly pulled out her sword under the protection of the air pressure.

Opening the vortex of the hurricane, a golden light shone forth as if to show the kingship of the knight; prana was continuously roiling.

"AAAALaLaLaLaLaie !!"

Accompanying Rider's roar, the bulls stamped hard once on the asphalt ground; their cloven hooves rushed forward like raging billows. Waver, though overwhelmed by their majesty, nevertheless made an utmost effort to open his eyes wide, so as not to pass out again like the last time. At the fore was a very strong anti-city Noble Phantasm about to be released; in order to gain the initiative, Rider rushed as if his life depended on it, definitely unwilling to give up an opportunity to defeat Saber.

The King of Conquerors' direct attack sent a shiver down Saber's spine. By the rushing of the divine bulls, the hundred-meter distance had instantaneously been decreased to zero. In the blink of an eye, the might of Gordius Wheel manifested before her eyes.

If the hilt of her precious sword had still been in her hand, then she would definitely have been certain of victory; facing the golden radiance that Rider raised, there was only one thing that she could shout out, one true name.

"Ex—"

In the moment that the rushing incarnation of thunder was about to trample upon Saber's small frame—

"Calibur!"

Golden lightning, as if radiating countless comets, made the night as bright as day.

"—!"

Waver's gaze was drawn by this, dazzled by this, and he could not help but turn around—within the intense attack, he rationalized extremely calmly and realized one thing.

He had personally witnessed the light of Saber's Noble Phantasm, and that meant… the result was that, before the Gordius Wheel had reached its final step, the King of Knights had taken the first step to initiate her attack.

But even thus, the touch of the thickset arm that extended all the way to his shoulder nevertheless did not disappear.

To be aware of one's own defeat at the same time indicated the truth that one was still alive and clearheadedly conscious.

Waver gingerly opened his eyes and saw the appalling condition of the battlefield.

Due to Excalibur's blow, the surface of the road had instantly been burned away; even the forest a little way away had been instantly blown to waste. The road was scarred, carved in the likeness of a single straight line. The molten asphalt gave off a revolting stench; it was extremely pungent. Waver felt as if his body was floating through the universe… no, carried by a strong man on his shoulders. Who was it that carried his young Master like a small luggage bag— it was not necessary to ask to know.

“Ah… we’ve failed.”

Rider said softly, as if remorseful from the heart. But considering the current situation, it did seem like too much of an understatement.

It appeared that Rider was not hurt, either. But the chariot in which he rode, as well as the two divine bulls, had all vanished without a trace. The Noble Phantasm ‘Gordius Wheel’ had borne the might of the ‘Sword of Promised Victory’ and so had, like Caster’s sea monster, vanished and left no trace, not even a speck of dust.

In the moment at which he had bordered the line of death, Rider, who had understood his failure, had quickly plucked Waver from the charioteer’s seat and narrowly escaped from under the attack of the anti-city Noble Phantasm. It could really be said that the two had cheated death. But the price was high enough. The flying chariot, which Rider had used as his main weapon all this time, had at the last minute gone up in smoke.

But this was not yet over—using his will to fight, Waver immediately chased away his frustration at failure. Even if the ‘Gordius Wheel’ had been taken away, the King of Conquerors still had one last real trump card.

“Rider! Use ‘Ionian Hetairoi’—“

Toward Waver who spoke thus, Rider lightly but very firmly shook his head. The King of Conquerors seemed to not yet intend to dismiss his foresight regarding the latter half of the war, which he had come up with while resting. If Saber was his opponent, it was best to use the chariot. As for the summoning of the Hetairoi, which could only be activated once, it was necessary to save it for the showdown with Archer later.

But no matter how physically strong and unwilling to admit defeat Rider was, to engage in a battle of blades without mechanical force was clearly a definitively advantageous position for Saber. Though the build of the two were vastly different, this was a battle between Servants that transcended normalcy. Though Saber looked weak, she had a monstrous fighting ability; from the battles so far, Waver had long since become aware of this.

Very obviously, Rider understood her strength well. But the King of Conquerors still did not look at all afraid; he confronted Saber open and aboveboard by raising his sword, without the slightest indication of retreat.

In this closely matched staring competition, it was Saber who lost first.

She slid the sword wrapped in windstorms back into its sheath, then released the throttle and slid the rear wheel around to turn the vehicle, speeding away with her back to Rider.

Saber did not show off her weakness to Rider at all; at the same time she was moving the rear wheel, she also quickly accelerated, leaving behind only a tremendous roar of exhaust and moving quickly in the direction of Fuyuki City in one breath.

To Waver and Rider, this was certainly unexpected; now Saber needed to quickly search for Irisviel and had no time for a showdown with Rider. She needed to find the culprit who had led her to clash with Rider, then snatch Irisviel back from that person; for this goal, even if she had to throw aside the showdown with Rider, she needed to retreat as soon as possible.

In the blink of an eye she had disappeared from sight, leaving only the roar of a motorcycle that was moving away. Waver and Rider stood there stupefied, listening to the sound of the motorcycle. Rider, who had been listening intensely to the sound of the exhaust, nodded, showing a knowing expression.

“A motorcycle… Nn, it is truly a good thing.”

“—You—after being defeated, this is really the first thing you have to say?”

In the aftermath of battle, all the strength had drained out of Waver’s body; angrily questioning Rider, he suddenly became aware of an important problem and became dismayed.

“Hey, Rider—how are we ever going to get back?”

“Ah, that… We shall have to walk.”

“—Yeah.”

In the darkness, Waver gazed upon Shinto which shone with light in the distance, and sighed heavily.

-36:38:09

Matō Zōken –

The man before him was the mastermind behind the Matō family, a presence known but never seen. Kotomine Kirei's senses couldn't help but go on the alert.

There was a small, short figure that had deliberately chosen to stand in a dark corner of the night street, a place that bright lights could not illuminate. Contrary to his shriveled and aged appearance, this man was an extremely dangerous entity; Tokiomi had told Kirei this time after time. Although he had publicly declared that he was retired and no longer cared for the businesses of the outside world, he was an abnormality that covertly used the secret arts of magecraft to prolong his life and rule over the Matō house for generations. In a way, he was far more dangerous than the actual Master of the family, Kariya. This old man was someone who required special attention.

"Kotomine Kirei. I heard that you're the son of that stubborn and honest Risei. Is that so?"

"That is true."

Kirei nodded to show agreement when he heard the question asked by this hoarse voice.

"Hmph – what a surprise. It is often said that heroes come from the most unexpected places. There must be some truth to it. I didn't think that man could sire a son as wily and deceitful as you."

"What do you want, Matō Zōken?"

Kirei ignored the old magus's provocation and demanded an answer.

"You should be on Kariya's side, so why did you have to hide here and eavesdrop on us?"

"What are you talking about? I'm just a parent worried about his child. I wanted to see with my own eyes what kind of helper that child Kariya got for himself."

He deliberately pretended to smile like a doting grandfather, but that skeletal, shriveled countenance was markedly different from that of normal humans. It was obvious that his face, with such a structure, would never have such a smile.

“I heard everything you said to Kariya to appease him. You seem to want to get rid of the son of the Tōsaka house.”

“That is true. That man killed my father –”

“Be quiet. Don’t repeat such a lie twice.”

Those deep-set eyes, buried in wrinkles, glistened with a keen light and stared at Kirei.

“Kotomine Kirei, you’ve gone too far with your petty trickery. You even dared to act behind Tōsaka’s back; you’ve overstepped your boundaries. You don’t need Kariya’s hand to kill Tokiomi at all, not since the moment you decided to get rid of him. You must have prepared for every eventuality – I’m not so old that I’m turning senile. You might be able to trick Kariya, but don’t you dare think you can trick me too.”

“…”

Kirei quietly improved his evaluation of this old magus in his mind, but he maintained his mask of calm.

“Your goal isn’t the son of the Tōsaka house, but Kariya himself. Isn’t it?”

“… If you doubt me so, then why didn’t you stop Kariya?”

A bone-chilling creaking sound, like the muted chirping of a hoard of insects, resonated. Kirei only understood it to be the sound of this old man’s suppressed laughter after a few moments.

“Hmm, how should I say this… you can say it is simply out of my curiosity. I want to see what methods you would use to ‘destroy’ Kariya. I am very interested in this.”

“… Zōken, can you really watch Kariya, who is fighting for the Matō house, have his chances of victory destroyed little by little?”

“Chances of victory? Kariya? Hmph, such things never existed. If that piece of trash can obtain the Holy Grail, then the past three bouts of slaughter would all seem like a comedy show.”

“I don’t quite understand. Isn’t the Matō house also one of the Three Noble Families of the Beginning, one that craves the Holy Grail?”

Hearing Kirei’s question, Zōken gave a cold snort.

“I think the Tōsaka son and those of the Einsbern house are all idiots. If they remember the details from the last battle of the previous war, then they should understand that there is something odd with this fourth Heaven’s Feel, and be alert towards it.

"I saw through the battle for this round from the start. Truth be told, just by looking at that despicable Caster at the start of the War, we should have been able to tell that the summoning didn’t call forth a Heroic Spirit, but an evil spirit far removed from heroes. Without a doubt, something has begun to err within the Heaven’s Feel system. We need to solve this problem first.”

This odd man, who had overcome ordinary humanity, had likely been present in every single Heaven’s Feel. This man Matō Zōken had grasped something that even the previous Supervisor, Kotomine Risei, had not known about.

“Then why did you let Kariya and Berserker participate? If you only wanted to watch from the sidelines, then why did you even prepare a Servant?”

“That’s not the reason. Although there were some dubious elements, it is still a grand ceremony held every 60 years, after all. It wouldn’t have been interesting to watch the children fumble around. Therefore, I found a unique method for me to enjoy the event.”

Zōken said with a tone of ridicule. His mouth tilted even more, and there were smiles all over his face.

“Of course, if that failure really grabbed the Grail, then there’s no better outcome. Despite what I say, I really am impatient.

"Just seeing how Kariya, who betrayed me, suffers in pain day by day – I honestly can’t get enough of it. I desire the Matō house’s victory, but I’m also tempted by the thought of observing Kariya’s defeated and helpless end. How conflicted I am!”

Zōken’s hoarse laughter was truly piercing to Kirei’s ears. How much better would it have been had they met on the battlefield and fought for their lives not with words, but with swords? He could not help thinking that even though he knew the other was a very dangerous old magus. It seemed that Kirei already found the existence of Matō Zōken to be unbearable.

Faced with the inquisition from Kirei, who was trying his best to hide the true feelings in his heart, Zōken lifted his eyebrows as if deliberately mocking the other man.

“Ahhh, how surprising. I thought you would've been able to understand my joy.”

“– What did you say?”

“I may look old, Kotomine Kirei, but my nose is still very sensitive. You have the same smell as I do. You’re like a maggot that crawled here, attracted by the piece of rotting meat that Kariya is.”

“…”

Kirei remained quiet, but slowly drew out his Black Keys from within his frock.

He now knew he could no longer persuade this old magus with reason, but they must fight to the death. Zōken had stepped into his range. He had entered the 'absolute territory' at the risk of his life. If he wanted to ensure his vitals remain safe, he could only use a killing strike, attacking the enemy head-on without any warning. If Zōken had thought of evading that strike at his vitals – an inevitably certain kill – Kirei would have no other choice but to confront him directly. Right now, Matō Zōken had already crossed this line - not with his feet, but with his words.

However, Zōken still faced the cold killing intent emanating from Kirei with a casual smile.

“…Oh? Did I overestimate you? I thought I’d finally managed to find a kindred spirit. It seems you still feel ashamed of your own heresy – hahaha, you’re still too inexperienced. Do you feel ashamed of these matters, such as a man would feel shame in indulging in self-pleasure?”

There were no shows of strength, nor were there any warnings. Kirei simultaneously threw out two Black Keys at his left and his right in the blink of an eye, so fast that his preparatory movements couldn’t even be seen. It was as if he was going to pierce this old man’s body like a piece of barbeque meat.

However, faced with those blades, Zōken remained completely unmoved. He was extremely nonchalant, and it was no empty boast. The silhouette of the old magus melted like mud moments before the two blades were about to pierce him through, and he once again became a shapeless shadow hiding in the corner.

Kirei’s entire body tensed up. A voice full of happy mockery sounded from somewhere.

“Ahh, scary, scary. You are young, but still a hound of the Church. It’ll definitely endanger my life if I mock you.”

Kirei took up another Black Key and stared at the throbbing shadow in the darkness.

Was it an illusion a moment ago, when he saw that he was just about to pierce Matō Zōken's flesh? Or was it that Matō Zōken's physical body didn't even exist here? Any kind of extraordinary thing was possible when it came to this wily and devious old magus. If such trivial matters surprised Kirei, then he would not be suited to the role of Executor.

"Honestly. Until next time, young man. You must nurture your personality so that you can be on equal footing with me the next time we meet. Hahahaha…"

Zōken's scent melted into the darkness and disappeared, leaving only a terrifying shrieking laughter. All that was left was the figure of Kirei, who stood holding his blade like a scarecrow.

"…"

Irritated, Kirei threw the Black Key, which had lost its target, on the roof.

He hadn't imagined that this old man was a monster with no usable potential whatsoever. There was no reason to keep him alive.

He was certain that Matō Zōken was a nemesis that he must eliminate sooner or later.

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To escape the gradually darkening night, Matō Byakuya continued to drown himself in alcohol.

Nothing had happened last night, and it passed peacefully. But now he was resentful of the fact. Mighty waves rushed up after calm sea weather. Nothing dangerous had happened last night and it went past peacefully, which meant that dangerous happenings would be afoot tonight.

Byakuya clearly understood the truth behind the alien events that had been threatening the Fuyuki night recently. He was the eldest son and inheritor of the prestigious Matō house, the final remnants of a mighty bloodline that had begun a pilgrimage to seek the traces of the Holy Grail in the distant past. In truth, he should have been a part of this cruel and extraordinary war as one of its participants.

However, he had turned his back on his duty and drowned himself in alcohol day after day. Byakuya felt no shame towards his own behavior. On the contrary, he actually thought his was the correct and logical attitude in comparison to his little brother Kariya. Byakuya could say that with his chest thrust out in pride.

Byakuya could never understand why Kariya, who had been disowned by the Matō house a long time ago, had returned to his homeland and gone so far as to participate in the Heaven's Feel. He didn't even want to understand it. He couldn't thank his little brother enough for having changed his mind. Had he not returned, the one reduced to such a state and forced to participate in the Heaven's Feel would have been not Kariya, but Byakuya himself.

Whenever he remembered that figure, black like a vengeful spirit, that Kariya had summoned using the Summoning Circle and signed a contract with – Byakuya could only use alcohol to numb himself, to get as far away from the terror he felt then as possible.

How could anyone stay sane when he knew there were 6 other such things slaughtering each other in the night while devouring human flesh and blood? The current Fuyuki city was an authentic demonic realm. Alcohol was the only thing he could rely on to keep on living in this place while maintaining a calm mentality.

His only child Shinji was sent overseas in the name of studying. Byakuya himself was strongly against staying in the present Fuyuki. However, he had no legitimate reason to leave the Matō mansion. Zōken had given him the task of acclimating the little girl adopted from the Tōsaka house to the underground worm storage and training her to one day be worthy of becoming the next head of the Matō house.

Yes. Byakuya had already completed his task to near perfection as the current head of the Matō house. Zōken's original plan had been to sit aside and observe this Heaven's Feel anyways. After all, Kariya was simply a toy played in that old magus's hand. Byakuya was the only one in the current Matō family who was walking along the right path. It wasn't a matter of the number of Magic Circuits. Even if his abilities were only good enough to defeat a small child, Byakuya still firmly believed his path was the only one that could truly connect to the future of the Matō house…

He said this to himself and continued to gulp down large mouthfuls of liquor into his stomach while despising his little brother.

Becoming a magus of the Matō house meant becoming the puppet of Zōken – the mastermind controlling everything behind the scenes. Because Byakuya understood this, he had no sympathy for Kariya, who had once left the family but foolishly returned and willingly became the foster bed for the Crest Worms. He never had much familial love for his little brother to begin with. Kariya had talent that far surpassed his older brother, but left the family and forced the cursed destiny carried by generations of the Matōs all unto Byakuya. How could he feel sympathetic toward such a man right now?

Ahh, why was he still not sleepy today? Normally, he would have been dead asleep a long time ago. He hadn't drunk enough; he was not drunk enough. He wanted to forget what was happening outside of the house as soon as possible, wanted to skip through the night as quickly as possible – but someone took the wine glass on the table and poured all the ice water in the glass onto Byakuya's head.

He fainted for a moment under the piercing cold, but his drunkenness was immediately dispelled and he regained consciousness. A merciless impact slammed into his cheek this time. Byakuya curved up into the blankets on his bed.

Byakuya's mentality snapped. Even his cries of horror were suppressed in his throat and couldn't be voiced. A wraith-like man whose appearance sent shivers down Byakuya's spine was standing there, looking down on him.

He was dressed in a dirty, creased old coat, and the stubble on his chin said he hadn't shaved in days. If judging by appearances alone, this man looked even more like a drunkard in a pub than Byakuya, who was inside his own house and dressed in everyday clothing. However, his eyes refuted all that. The temperature in that man's eyes had already surpassed the realms of cruelty or mercilessness. It was only filled with the cold sadism and lethality of a wounded beast. After staring into those eyes, Byakuya surrendered all will to uncover the origins of this man or his business here and became a complete slave of despair.

Who this man was, how he had broken through the impressive layers of protective boundaries outside the house; none of that mattered now. This thing that now appeared before Byakuya was undoubtedly the reincarnation of the very horror that he had only managed to temporarily forget through the effects of alcohol for the past week.

"…Where is Irisviel right now?"

Byakuya was convinced that he must answer before he understood the meaning of the question, or else he would be killed.

– After a moment, he finally realized he actually didn't understand the meaning of this question. Byakuya was instantly crushed by an overwhelming despair.

"I, I, I…"

Byakuya moaned unintelligibly. The man stared at him with an ice-cold gaze and slowly took out the weapon from his coat. He roughly jammed Byakuya's right hand between the floor and the muzzle and pressed the trigger.

Byakuya's right hand scattered in the wind with a thundering bang that could make anyone who heard it go insane.

A part of his body had just disappeared without reason. Byakuya was so shocked that he couldn't speak. After a while, a scarring pain made him scream in agony.

"No, no no no I don't know I just don't know I don't know anything! Ahhhhhhhhhhhh! My hand! AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

"…"

There was no one with more experience with getting information out of people unwilling to provide it than Emiya Kiritsugu. Instinct honed over the years told him he wouldn't get much of an answer even if he kept asking.

Matō Byakuya's soul had already been ruined long ago. Although Kiritsugu didn't know the reason, Byakuya had already forced himself onto a road of no return long before Kiritsugu came to visit.

In retrospect, Kiritsugu was the final straw that broke his back and made him crumble completely. This man before him would not hesitate to do anything to get rid of his present pain, including betraying Zōken. When they reached such a stage, everything humans said was a guaranteed truth.

It seemed Byakuya truly didn't know anything about what had happened in the last few hours.

Which meant – the destination of Irisveil's kidnappers was definitely not the Matō mansion.

He had spent hours breaking through the protective barriers in such a pressing and tense circumstance, and yet the result was nothing. Kiritsugu couldn't help but grit his teeth in regret.

By process of elimination, only those from the Matō camp could have kidnapped Irisviel. Rider's Master didn't have the reconnaissance ability to discover the secret headquarters Kiritsugu had prepared, whereas Tōsaka didn't need to contradict himself in this way when they had just formed an alliance last night.

Although the possibility of a new opposing force emerging apart from the seven Masters and Servants was very low, it was not impossible. However, such wild guesses wouldn't get him any results at this stage. At the moment, he could only find this potential enemy amongst the three Masters who still had the protection of their Servants and needed Irisviel for the final stage.

It was almost four hours after the raid on the underground storage. Victory was slipping further away from Kiritsugu with every second he lost, and he had no time to stop and think thoroughly.

Kiritsugu didn't even bother to look at Byakuya, who was sobbing with pain and terror, and left the Matō mansion.

Kiritsugu again used about three hours to break through the protective magecraft formations in order to enter the Tōsaka mansion, his next target.

His methods were already close to miraculous. The bounded field that Tōsaka Tokiomi set up was a first-rate security system specifically guarding against magi, and was created with magi in mind to begin with. It couldn't be broken through by sheer magecraft even if attacked continuously for a whole year. Kiritsugu could overcome this bounded field in a short time precisely because he was someone who did not seek results by way of magecraft and fought against magi by perceiving traps wrought through magecraft.

However, no matter how comparatively quick he was, it was long enough to make Kiritsugu anxious in the current state. He had never wasted this much time on the battlefield. He had finally broken through the protection between the inner porch and the living room, but Kiritsugu was still tormented with a nameless anxiety the moment he arrived in the main lounge. Although he passed through the protective

barriers at the risk of his life, it didn't mean he was guaranteed to find Irisviel, just as had happened at the Matō mansion.

Saber, who started chasing Irisviel one step before Kiritsugu, must have also failed. He could still feel that the Circuits providing prana were not interrupted, which meant that Saber had not suffered any major attacks.

However, had she been safely protected, Irisviel would have definitely activated her signal conducting system and relayed Kiritsugu with detailed information on her current location. He still had not received that, which meant Saber's pursuit had also been a wasted effort.

After carefully removing the seal on the window, he also removed the inner plug with glass-cutting tools. Kiritsugu had finally arrived at the inner parts of the Tōsaka mansion. No lights were lit within, and all was quiet. It was almost like an empty house with no inhabitants. However, because it was an enormous mansion, such conclusions were hard to draw. As an outstanding Master, Tokiomi was much more prudent than the eldest son of the Matō house. If they were to chance upon each other, then Kiritsugu must make the mental preparedness to fight him. Of course, he would definitely use Archer, and Kiritsugu would have to summon Saber here too. He would have to once again spend a Command Seal and forcibly summon her here.

Although he had wanted to avoid having a confrontation between Saber and Archer, whose true fighting strength remained to be seen, the current situation was too urgent for him to be able to choose his battle strategies. Even so, he wanted to start fighting after having confirmed Irisviel's whereabouts. If it happened to be an unknown enemy who currently had possession of Irisviel, then Kiritsugu would be falling into a trap if he began to duel with the Matō or Tōsaka houses. What annoyed him the most was that he had to consider this possibility and be wary of it.

Suddenly, Kiritsugu's sense of smell detected something unavoidable as he stepped into a dark room.

It was the stench of blood. It was undoubtedly fresh.

He focused his prana to his eyes and used night sight. He could instantly see the furniture and design of the room with impeccable clarity. It seemed to be a living room. There were also two sets of teacups on the table.

There was obviously a large amount of blood in the middle of the luxurious carpet.

Kiritsugu carefully checked the bloodstain, which had dried completely. Although the blood had not splattered widely, the amount shed didn't seem to be from a light wound. With his experience, he concluded it could only have been a bloodstain left from a stab wound.

Kiritsugu searched through all the other rooms, just to be careful. However, his goal was no longer to have a better grasp of the situation, but to find the inhabitant here.

As a medium and the starting point of magecraft, blood was the most important ingredient in magecraft. It would have been unthinkable for a magus to casually let out his blood in his territory with no intent to cast a spell. Of course, it would be a different matter entirely if it happened to be the magus's particular habit. However, according to Kirtisugu's previous investigations, the man Tōsaka Tokiomi was not so careless.

His premonition became conviction when he reached the basement workshop without much trouble. A magus would never allow others to easily set foot into his workshop even if he was away from home, let alone present in the house. It seemed that Tokiomi was not only absent from his home, but in a situation where he couldn't even detect the current state of his house.

To verify, Kiritsugu took out an eye drop bottle from his pocket containing the liquid that could be used to test his hypothesis. The liquid was made by refining the body fluids of a succubus, a kind of demon that particularly liked to seduce men. It was especially sensitive to the blood of men and aged things, and could distinguish differences accurately.

First he tested the reaction of the liquid in the bathroom sink, and then he verified the bloodstains in the living room. It was evident that the reaction was the same for both. Only one man would have shaved at this bathroom sink in the past few days.

And that man's blood was spilled on the carpet in the living room…

Now he was sure Tōsaka Tokiomi was either dead or had disappeared.

Faced with the emergence of this surprising turn of events, Kiritsugu did his best to calm himself and began to assess the situation.

There were no traces of a fight in the room. The two teacups placed here were to welcome a guest. Tokiomi had definitely suffered a heavy or even lethal wound after having chatted to someone in this room, whom he had welcomed as a guest. It seemed that Kiritsugu wasn't the only one carrying out revenge on magi.

But what was Tokiomi's Servant doing at that time? How could he look from the sidelines and ignore his Master? However, there was another possibility… the possibility that Archer no longer needed Tokiomi as a Master, and Archer murdered Tokiomi together with his next contractor. This would also be a reasonable explanation.

Faced with this solemn answer that he had achieved after prolonged thought, Kiritsugu felt as if a knife was twisting in his heart.

A man who was Tōsaka Tokiomi's friend and was welcomed as a guest, a man before whom Tokiomi could even show his weaknesses.

Archer's new Master had gained new Command Seals – he was someone who had lost his Servant and thus lost the authority of a Master, but retained his life.

There was no need to think any further. There was only one such man. Moreover, if he had really obtained a new Servant and was once again participating in the Heaven's Feel, kidnapping Irisviel and controlling the 'Vessel of the Grail' with his own hands would have been a logical and necessary move.

Therefore – Kiritsugu finally understood that confrontation with Kotomine Kirei was unavoidable.

-30:02:45

It was midnight, but a bright light was still on in the hilltop church.

The house of God that promised peace on earth – as he came upon it, a small yet contradictory sentiment stopped Matō Kariya in his tracks.

The naivety of those humans who easily sought solace at the so-called place of prayer. He sneered at the thought; but at the same time, one could not help but feel sympathy towards them.

If one said that every suffering in this world was but a trial of God, then Kariya would strangle that God and His disciples to death with his own hands – he was probably driven by that impulsion.

One step, and then another. Steadily, Kariya was getting closer to the Holy Grail. But even faster, the crest worms inside his body kept eating into his life. If he strained his ears, he could almost hear the trilling sound of the worms slurping flesh and blood from his body, the sound of them scraping his bones and feasting on them. To Kariya, the pain of the crest worms' slow, continual torture had already become a part of himself, like breath and heartbeat. His consciousness was always cloudy and dim, and if he lost focus he would be only vaguely aware of the passage of time.

He swore never to forgive him as a person. Like water seeping out of a crevice, that thought continued to erode his heart bit by bit.

How many more times can I fight later?

How many more days will I live?

If Kariya was trying to gain the Holy Grail and secure Sakura's salvation with his own hands – which was exactly his last wish - he could only wait for a miracle, right?

If that was the case, should he pray? From the top of the towering gable roof in front of him, at that cross with its detached gaze, the worms creeping towards the ground; should he kneel down and pray earnestly?

"Stop kidding… me… ugh!"

He felt like he was being flooded by a humiliating timidity. Scoldingly, Kariya rebuked himself. He did not come to the church at a time like this to seek imaginary help. No, it was the exact opposite. This evening, Kariya sought the blood of his sworn enemy. If he was to believe Kotomine Kirei's words, then at this moment, the one awaiting

Kariya's visit at the chapel was none other than Tōsaka Tokiomi. He was not here for repentance or worship – Kariya was standing in front of the altar now to conclude a vendetta. Kotomine Kirei had prepared an unlikely rematch for his previous duel with Tokiomi, the one he had lost. Tonight would probably be his last chance to get back at that loathsome magus. He must not be careless.

The pain of his flesh, conflict and despair – all were burned down to ashes by the flames of hatred that flared up in his heart.

Memories of the previous battle – he had not even returned a single attack – further fanned the fury within Kariya.

His mind could only see the instant in which he would destroy Tokiomi – who had snatched Aoi away from him and abandoned Sakura – with his own hands. With only that in mind – how near he was to the Holy Grail; the terror of being defeated – all was forgotten. He had completely turned into an automatic, hate-driven machine. With only that in mind, Matō Kariya's heart was liberated from all sufferings. His mouth even curved into a smile. There was no longer any fear of letting Berserker loose. With that, he would grab Tokiomi's heart, and he would bathe in the gush of his blood. If he could achieve that, there was nothing he could not afford to lose – he was reduced to such thinking.

His shoulders shook like a beast drawing a deep breath. Having arrived at the front gate of the church with killing intent seething from his entire body, Kariya slowly pushed the doors open.

A candlelight glimmered gently in the center of the chapel. In contrast, the still air was overly peaceful, as if it had frozen. Kariya felt a slight sense of unease, like one would feel in a graveyard. Nevertheless, the instant he saw the back of the head of the person sitting in the first row of the congregation seats, he was awash with overwhelming anger.

"Tōsaka, Tokiomi…!!"

It was a shout brimming with killing intent, but there was no reply. Knowing that complete disregard was just like the prideful attitude of the magus, Kariya walked in on large strides and closed his distance with Tokiomi.

“You want to kill me, Tokiomi? But you’re too naïve. Until I have my revenge on you, no matter how many times, I will……”

But with his defenseless back exposed to Kariya, Tokiomi still did not show any response. Despite himself, Kariya slowed his pace with distrust and caution.

He wondered if it was a decoy puppet sitting there to trick Kariya. However, from up close he could see the shoulder width, the carefully trimmed, curly and glossy hair, and even the shape of his slightly visible ears – without a doubt, this was Tōsaka. Kariya would not be mistaken about the figure of his sworn enemy, which had been burned into his eyes.

Kariya came to a distance where could reach out and touch Tokiomi with his hands, and stopped.

With hatred and an odd unease and confusion, he gazed at the back of Tokiomi, who had not budged an inch.

“Tōsaka –“

He stretched out his hand.

The day before yesterday, defensive fire had stopped all his attacks. Recalling the scorching heat, he instinctively drew his hand back. Even so, he could not resist the impulse to grab Tokiomi’s neck, just a few centimeters away, and break it… Finally, the shivering fingertip reached the front of the neck with its stylish tie.

With just a light touch, the corpse that had been leaning against the seat lost its balance.

The flaccid limbs were like those of a puppet whose strings had been cut. Like building blocks tumbling down, Tōsaka Tokiomi’s ice-cold body collapsed into Kariya’s arms.

“–“

At that moment, the confusion and shock that hit Matō Kariya was as destructive as a single hammer blow to his head.

Like an empty shell, the blank face was unmistakable – without any room for doubt, it was the countenance of Tōsaka Tokiomi. At that point, Kariya had no other choice but to accept that Tokiomi was dead.

The once scornful, haughty derision, all the intimately cold-hearted and sneering words; all the memories related to Tōsaka Tokiomi saturated Kariya's thoughts and overwhelmed him. With the existence of Tokiomi as a starting point, the sentiments, motivation, and urge swirling within Kariya, were all blown off at once.

"W – W – Why….?"

And then, standing with the soundless corpse in his hands, thunderstruck, Kariya was stunned at the size of the hole gaping wide within it. A cavity so large that it caused Matō Kariya's countenance to crumble to an unrecognizable appearance.

At that moment, for the first time, he realized that he had not considered, much less foreseen losing his driving factor – his bitter enemy, Tōsaka Tokiomi; but this realization was already too late. Uncontrollably shaken, Kariya was at a point where he could not even recall basic information like why he had been fighting Tokiomi or what had he wished for in participating in the war of the Holy Grail.

And then –

"……Kariya...-kun?"

– At that moment, until he sensed the presence of the new visitor who had just stepped into the chapel, until he was called from behind by that familiar and lovely voice – Kariya had not noticed anything at all.

Turning back in a stupor, Kariya could not grasp at all why Aoi Tōsaka was still standing there. If his brain had been functioning properly, he probably would have wondered why he was being called by Aoi of all people, and why she had visited this place when there was no reason at all for her to do so. And he probably could have gone even further back in his train of thought to the one person who would have been able to position Tokiomi's body at the chapel beforehand – it had to be a human - and been able to guess without difficulty the identity of the person who had killed Tokiomi.

"A….u….."

However, at the height of his confusion, in a state where he could not mouth legible words, Kariya could only moan uselessly. The instant he staggered back, the corpse he had been carrying in his arms fell onto the chapel floor with like a sack. Thud. For a long time, Aoi stared at the figure that had once been her husband. Staring, without twitching a muscle.

“Aoi...-san…… I……”

Without uttering a syllable, Aoi slowly approached Tokiomi’s body as if being drawn to him. For reasons unknown, Kariya felt overpowered and retreated further, but was obstructed by an obstacle just a few steps later. Rigidly still as if passing judgment unto him, it was the altar of the chapel.

Bending her knees to the floor, Aoi lifted Tokiomi’s face up. With no place to hide, Kariya could only watch her. He could not understand why Aoi did such a thing. – No, he did not want to understand. Why she did not even spare a glance at him, her childhood friend, but continually fixed her eyes on the body of Tokiomi; what the meaning of those tears falling down her face was – Kariya obstinately rejected comprehension, and because of that, he could not utter a single word.

If memory served – he was supposed to never make this person – whom he loved above anyone else – cry again, and to fight for her even at the cost of his life.

If that was the case, then this woman sobbing in front of him right now – who was she? If he were to accept the answer, wouldn’t Matō Kariya fall to pieces?

She did not look at Kariya. As if ignoring the air and all else, tears poured out from her to her husband’s body. She, the tragic heroine, was exactly at the center of the world as its axis of revolution. Having regarded her in that way, Kariya was an existence devoid of all meaning, like trash on the stage or a stain in the background. Kariya was terrified of the delusion that his position and his very existence were erased. He even felt the impulse to scream to catch her attention. But not a sound could come out of his dry throat.

Nevertheless, before long, when he was looked straight in the eye by Aoi – who had finally lifted her head up – Kariya finally understood: Ignorance was a greater compassion; if he could disappear from the world at that instant, it would be a far greater relief.

“……So now it’s as if the Matōs had gained the Holy Grail, right? Happy now, Kariya-kun?”

It was a familiar voice, but in a tone he had never heard before. That was because his gentle and kind childhood friend had never hated or cursed anyone in front of Kariya before.

“I – but, I – “

Why must he be blamed? Tokiomi Tōsaka was the cause of all the evil. When that man was not around, everything was supposed to turn out well. First of all, why had he died in a place like this? It should have been Kariya asking questions instead.

“Why…..?”

However, not even allowing time for Kariya to reply, she asked him back instead.

“So after snatching Sakura away from me, the Matōs are still not satisfied? Of all people, you killed this man in front of my own eyes…… Why? Did you really hate us so much?”

I don’t know I don’t know.

With a face just like Aoi's; with a voice just like Aoi's; why was this woman directing such seething enmity and cold killing intent towards Matō Kariya?

Kariya was supposed to have saved Aoi. He was supposed to have obtained a future for her beloved daughter. Then why was he being blamed? Who on earth was this woman?

“That guy – it’s his, fault – “

Pointing at Tokiomi’s corpse with a shaky hand, Kariya tried to correct Aoi in a loud voice.

“If that man would just, disappear – no misfortune would befall on anyone. Aoi-san, Sakura-chan – I thought you’d be, happy –“

“Stop talking nonsense!”

With a demonic expression, the woman shouted.

“You, what do you know! Someone who has *never loved anyone before*!”

“– Ah –“

With a snap –

– the decisive cracking sound caused Matō Kariya to collapse.

“I…”

I have a person I loved.

Someone warm and gentle; someone whom I want to be happy, above everyone else.

If it's for her sake, even my life was worth it. Because I felt this way, I had to, endure, endureendureendureendureendureendureendureendureendureendureendureendure endureendure to this day whatever pain or hardships so being denied with no chance of explaining myself so for whose sake that I am willing to die for GO TO HELL you're lying you're lying you're lying the one I love most is without a doubt certainly I –

"For me…… the person…… I love ……"

While murmuring with a scraping sound, Kariya's fists tightened.

In order to heap denials upon those words that denied his everything; in order to shut her mouth up, he tightly squeezed her throat.

The woman opened and closed her mouth, gasping for oxygen like a fish that had left its tank – and yet it seemed to Kariya as if she was trying to form words to further abuse him, which infuriated him all the more.

If I don't shut her up, everything will end. Everything I've done to this day will be meaningless. There's no way I can allow that to happen.

As a matter of fact, Matō Kariya's madness was the last fortress left to rescue him. In spite of that, he had even missed that lowliest aid at the last moment – the face of the woman rapidly turning deathly pale due to lack of oxygen was too similar to the image of the beloved woman he cherished so much in his heart – no, it was the very woman herself. At last, Kariya realized that.

"……Ah."

At the instant both hands loosened up, a sound slipped from Aoi's mouth.

Collapsing onto the ground with a thud, she had fainted, not budging an inch. Lacking even the sound judgment to differentiate the living from the dead, Kariya thought that just like Tokiomi, she had died.

"Ah, ah……"

He gazed at the hands that had just choked Aoi with all their might. Someone more important than anything else; someone who was the very meaning of his life – those fingers that had plucked that someone away stiffened like they belonged to someone else. But without a doubt, there was no way to deceive himself – those fingers belonged to him.

Like a peal of thunder, he realized. Those fingers squirming so shakily were just like the crest worms creeping about Sakura's skin.

"AaaaaAAAaaaaaAAAAAAhhhhHHHHHHhhhHH…!"

He clawed at his broken face.

He tore his dried-up hair.

A scream escaped his throat. Whether it was a shriek or a wail, he could not even understand that.

Losing the last bit of sense in him, with only his animalistic instinct, Kariya desperately sought to flee; stumbling, he ran away from the chapel.

The man who had lost everything was greeted by the pitch-black darkness of the starless night.

Within the chapel of Fuyuki Church, there were secrets known only to the priest.

The wall that separated the chapel and the priest's room in the back in reality only served as a partition. It was built with the consideration that all the writings in the chapel went through the priest's room.

Therefore, as he relaxed in a chair of the priest's room, Kotomine Kirei could hear every development of the tragedy in detail.

He seemed deeply immersed in his thoughts. Beside him, the golden Servant watching over him asked.

"A foolish, worthless play. Oh well, not too bad for the first script you wrote. – How was it Kirei? Your views?"

"……"

Silently gazing into space, Kirei gulped down wine from a glass he was holding.

It was a mysterious sensation. The plot was just as he imagined and expected – it was performed and recreated relying on human beings in flesh and blood, furnished with souls.

There was no surprise at all. Both Matō Kariya and Tōsaka Aoi had accepted the roles Kirei conveyed to them; and at the appointed time, they had visited the church

and encountered each other with the perfect timing. He had not expected Tokiomi's body – which was just a stage prop – to have the exact effect he desired. Because he had rectified the death spots and the stiffened post-mortem body, theoretically, no one should have been able to perceive that the person had been dead for more than half a day.

But if it was a development that betrayed none of his expectations - even if there were supposed to be no surprises – when he watched over it to the end, he felt a peculiar excitement.

If it was to be named, it might be called a sense of "freshness".

The tragic scene just now was not a fantasy performed by actors. It was true that Kirei had guided the scene. But baring their innermost feelings, his fellow humans clashed against one another – the radiance of souls scattering the sparks was, without a doubt, authentic. While struggling to decide on an answer to Gilgamesh's question, Kirei tasted the fragrance of the wine in his mouth again. Indeed, if it was surprise he was looking for, he was better off looking into this wine.

"…… Why, I drank this before, and yet…… I did not notice how profound the taste of this wine was."

The King of Heroes smiled at Kirei who gazed at his wine glass, straight-faced.

"The taste of a wine is disguised in unexpected forms depending on the side dish served alongside it. Looks like you have begun to understand the meaning of the phrase, 'broaden one's view'."

"……"

Not knowing the best way to reply to the rapturous Gilgamesh, Kirei put down his empty glass and stood up. He thought about the things he was supposed to attend to later and felt that he could not afford to keep relaxing. Aoi, lying on the chapel floor, would undoubtedly require treatment. And he also had to retrieve the fleeing Kariya for his next course of action.

Nevertheless, before leaving the room, Kirei once again glanced at the empty glass. He noticed that he felt reluctant to part with the wine, which he had finally finished.

Earnestly, he thought – *if I can taste such flavor from this wine, I would love to drink it again.*

ACT15

Act 15

-25:48:06

The sky was already brightening by the time Waver Velvet returned to the MacKenzie house in Miyama.

He had walked for hours on the night footpath. He wouldn’t have managed to make it back to town had he not met a taxi on the way. It had been a stroke of luck that an empty taxi was in such a remote location, but he didn't know if he should feel thankful or angry. Fortune should have graced them when Rider and Waver were in their fiercest moment of battle. He could only feel sad at this untimely luck.

Waver let out a long sigh at his prolonged night march when he got out of the taxi. Suddenly, he heard someone call out to him.

“– Hey, Waver. Come, come here.”

The voice was coming from above his head.

He lifted his head. Old man Glen, the patriarch of the family that Waver had assumed was sound asleep, was sitting on the rooftop of the second story and was waving at Waver as he stood at the door.

“Grandpa? You… what are you doing?”

“Alright, alright. Come on up. I’ve got something to say to you.”

“Something to say to me? Then… why are you on the roof?”

“You won't find a view like this anywhere else. There's no better place than this to be bathed in the light of the early dawn.”

This kind of strange behavior was enough to make people wonder if he was going senile. To be honest, Waver didn’t feel like humoring the old man. He had returned with a tired, shuffling gait after having suffered through the chilly night air; all he wanted right now was to tuck into bed as soon as possible and let his exhausted body have some rest.

“Grandpa… can it wait till morning?”

“Don’t say that.”

Although his tone was placid, old man Glen was quite adamant.

“Kid, you better get up there. That old man seems to really want to say something to you.”

A rough voice that only Waver could hear said this above his shoulder. Rider had finally promised to conserve his prana and remained in spiritual form on his return journey after his fight with Saber.

“I’ll keep an eye out on the surroundings. Don’t worry.”

“It’s not a matter of whether I’m worried…”

Waver wanted to rebuke, but immediately hushed himself. Old men Glen couldn’t see a Servant in spiritual form. If Waver spoke, it would look like he was muttering to himself oddly.

“No one cares about what I think…”

At this stage, with the War of the Holy Grail almost at its end, he had to force himself to provide company for this useless old man. Waver couldn’t help but feel resentful. However, it would only drag this on for longer if he started to argue. Even if he didn’t agree to it, he still didn’t know how to respond if he was asked why he was returning in the early hours of the morning. In the end, Waver could only walk towards the roof, where the old man was at.

The MacKenzie house differed from the other houses in one way: its roof had an attic and a skylight. It was easy to climb up to the roof through the skylight if one used the ladder that stretched towards the rooftop attic from the second-story stairway. It had not been made that way by accident. Rather, the house had been been designed to enable easy access to the rooftop when from construction. It was easy to get onto the roof if one got used to it.

Although it was easy to get up to the roof, he had to endure the frosty winter dawn. Waver, having gotten up from the skylight, shivered in the northern wind. With absolutely nothing around to break the wind, the chill at this height was incomparable to what it had been on ground level.

“Sit. Here, I prepared some coffee. Drinking it will heat you up.”

Old man Glen said loudly as he poured the steaming liquid out of the thermal flask and into the mug. He was wearing a down coat and had a few blankets wrapped around him. It seemed the old man had made thorough preparations for the cold. Waver couldn’t think of a reason for the old man to do this.

“Grandpa… how long have you been sitting here?”

“I woke up when the sky was getting bright, and I discovered you were still not back. Moreover, you can look at the spring constellations at this time of the year. So I wanted to look at the sky while I waited for my grandson’s return…”

Waver didn’t reply when he heard those drunken and almost senile words, just drinking his coffee nonchalantly. Glen had thought of getting up specifically to look at constellations; did all old men have such leisurely thoughts?

“What’s wrong, Waver? Didn’t you like this spot a lot when you were young? You watched the stars with me many times. Do you still remember that?”

“Mm… I think so.”

Waver gazed out at the scene beneath him as he perfunctorily brushed off these past events that he had no memories of.

The entirety of Fuyuki city, from Miyama to the sea, could be seen from the rooftop since the house was grounded at the side of the hill. The air was fresh and crisp while the dawn dyed the sea with a shade of pearly pink, and he could even detect with his eyes the shadow of sails sailing away to distant lands.

“How is it? Isn’t this a nice view?”

“…”

It was the entire view of the battlefield for Waver. He had no leisure in his heart to appreciate such beauty.

“I first set foot on this land because of a business trip… Martha asked for two things when I discussed the decision to leave our bones on the land of Fuyuki with her. One was that the house was to be built on the hill of Miyama, and the other was that there had to be a skylight that allowed us to go on the roof… However, Chris still couldn’t forget Toronto. He just didn’t want to be brought up a Japanese.”

Glen’s gaze, immersed in memory, looked toward the other side of the ocean, his homeland where his departed son resided.

“… Do you really like Japan that much?”

“You could say that. But if that was ultimately the reason why I fought with my son and separated with him… then honestly, I regret it…”

The old man let out a sigh as he recalled those years of loneliness.

“I’ve always dreamed of sitting on the roof and watching the stars with my grandson just like this, though I expect it will never happen.”

“– Huh?”

There was an obvious incongruity in that reminiscence, accompanied with a bitter smile. That made Waver pause.

As if mocking him, old man Glen silently shook his head and said.

“My real grandson never came to the roof with me. Martha is also afraid of heights. I’d always been alone when I watched the stars…”

What injured Waver more than the awkwardness and the sense of crisis was the feeling of humiliation.

“Say, Waver, you aren’t our grandson, right?”

The subliminal hint was removed – moreover, it was by this gentle old man with no training in magecraft.

“I –”

“Mmm, who are you? It doesn’t matter. It’s incredible that Martha and I actually believed you were our grandson. But even after living for so long, I've found that some incredible things in this world remain incredible no matter how hard you think about them… Your usual behavior was gentler than our grandson's, anyways.”

“… Aren’t you angry?”

Waver asked in a small voice. Old man Glen said with a complex but calm expression.

“As for that, of course I’m angry. However, Martha is always smiling happily now; that used to be impossible. I need to thank you for that."

“…”

“Also, it seemed you didn’t enter our house with ill intent. Straightforward youths like you and that man Alex are so hard to find nowadays. As to why you deceived us… I couldn’t understand it even if I wanted to.”

Waver came to the conclusion that this old man was completely defenseless and extremely dense. Even the lab rats in the Clock Tower were smarter than him.

Why didn’t he hate Waver? Why didn’t he blame Waver? For Waver, who only knew the small world of the Mage's Association, the old man’s leniency was something he couldn’t comprehend.

“Or maybe I can ask you to stay only because I don’t know anything about you… If possible, I hope we can keep this relationship for a while longer. Myself aside, Martha probably didn’t feel anything unusual. It doesn’t matter if it was a dream. The times we spent with our kind grandson have been our hard-sought treasure.”

Waver couldn’t bring himself to look at the old man. He lowered his eyes and looked at his hands.

It was a pair of hands that would one day create great mysteries. He had such talent – even if others refuted him, at the very least he could firmly believe in that possibility within himself.

But what did reality say?

He couldn't even carry out a hypnotic hint, the most basic art amongst basics, to an outstanding degree. It wasn’t a matter of luck or an accident. Those excuses were useless. His magecraft didn’t even maintain a satisfactory result when faced with this kind old man who begged him to deceive them a while longer.

Had he been that man, he could have obtained his goal while laughing and holding a goblet in his hand.

Not only did Waver Velvet’s magecraft fail to achieve such a result, he had been indebted to another’s gentleness in return.

There was a sense of absurdity on top of regret – yes, he was only a clown.

Staring into the empty sky, Waver became oblivious to his surroundings and sank into contemplation. Now he fully understood the mindsets of those in the Clock Tower who had laughed at him. Waver was laughing at his own stupidity with those people.

Although he thought as such, he couldn’t actually laugh. Glen and Martha MacKenzie weren’t expecting a comedy.

They were making a sincere request to Waver in their own way. Now that he thought about it, this was the first time that he wasn’t the subject of ridicule.

“… I’m sorry, I can’t promise you that. I can’t even promise I can safely return here next time.”

“So you and Alex are doing something that endangers your lives?”

“Yes.”

Saber’s Noble Phantasm and its cold light flashed before his eyes. That had happened half a day ago. Waver would not forget the abyss of death he saw then any time soon.

Old man Glen was silent for a while as if in thought, then he gave a heavy nod.

“I don’t know how important that thing is to you… but I do hope you will listen to me say this. You’ll realize that there’s nothing more important than life itself when you look back after having lived through most of it.”

This logic was in contrary to the reason for which Waver gambled his youth.

The so-called way of magecraft could only begin once the practitioner became prepared to die – the ultimate state could only be achieved by burning away one’s life. That was the direction he had labored towards until this day.

However, if one were to search for a way of existence that fits oneself, then perhaps the words said by this peaceful old man would prove to be the truth.

With a sense of loss that left him speechless, Waver stared at the dawn.

Little did he know that he was greeting the final day of the fourth War of the Holy Grail.

-17:21:41

People remembered that day in Fuyuki city to be one of abnormal weather conditions.

Unbelievably, the daily north wind suddenly ceased, and intense, midsummer-like sunlight scorched the seemingly stagnant air, resulting in an unseasonable heat haze everywhere. Bafflingly high temperatures and humidity – inexplicable even to weather forecasters – occurred over a very limited region with Fuyuki city at its center, further fueling the premonitions first felt by the clueless townspeople when strange things had first begun to happen.

The guerrilla incidents happening one after another in the city; the bizarre, appalling murderers; the disappearance of infants – not a single clue could be found towards a solution. There was no sign of the night curfew being lifted, and worse still, there had been the incident of the waste processing plant on the Mion River the day before yesterday. With these constantly bizarre incidents grating the nerves of the exhausted people, they could not help but feel that this peculiar weather was an omen of more calamities yet to occur.

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Sitting wide awake in the shade of a tree, Emiya Kiritsugu watched as the angle of his shadow slowly changed with the blazing sunlight.

More than 40 hours had elapsed since he last slept, but his senses were still tense, never desiring rest.

Because he was in a dangerous situation, he had to time his breaks well and maintain a condition at which he could deal with things perfectly in crucial times – this was his experience as a professional fighter. Because the forewarning boundary field was already in place in key positions, when someone approached him he could instantly wake up. If he was in standby mode now, he could enter REM sleep within a few seconds, possibly dealing with his accumulated fatigue as well.

However, at this moment, Kiritsugu did not even spare a thought about such established caution. To cut off his feelings and maintain his very best condition was also one of his “mechanisms”, but under the state of being prepared to be scorched, he was able to surpass his limits and overdrive himself – this was another

“mechanism”. The thing able to convert himself to such operational state was none other than the premonition of “settling the score” he felt under his skin.

Right now, the thing Kiritsugu was anticipating for was by the side of the pond in the back of Ryūdōji Temple, which was situated along the mountainside of Mount Enzō, east of Miyama town of Fuyuki city.

After confirming Tokiomi’s fallout and Kotomine Kirei’s comeback at the Tōsaka residence yesterday night, Kiritsugu launched an assault on the Shinto church immediately, but that which was supposed to be his headquarters was already empty. There were signs of humans being there about an hour before, so it was possibly a paper-thin miss. The delays during the invasions of the Matō residence and Tōsaka residence had cost him precious time.

At that point, Kiritsugu had completely abandoned his search for Irisviel. That’s because he came to the conclusion that if he continued to be attached to her, he would fall all the more into the enemy’s trap. If he wanted to have any chance of winning, Kiritsugu had no choice but to enter into battles not as a husband who lost his wife, but as a Master seeking the Holy Grail.

By relinquishing the “Holy Grail vessel” – the trump card of the Einsberns – Kiritsugu now had to participate in the Holy Grail war with terms similar to that of outsider Masters (not from the three origin families). The strategy of luring the enemy to make mistakes whilst utilizing his superiority and overlooking his defense was no longer viable; he now had to seek ambush opportunities to outsmart his leading rivals. Thinking about it, what made the strategy of jumping ahead of his opponents effective was that he could, from this point onwards, fortify his position – which was to look beyond the final stage of the battle – and to set up traps about it.

From the outside, the War of the Holy Grail was mending its image as a battle royal, but as the war progressed, it began to show signs of it being a battle of occupying each other’s camps. The ultimate goal was to hold the ceremony for the descent of the Holy Grail; but to secure a proper place for the altar was part of the victor’s path which could not be avoided.

In Fuyuki, there were only four points in the land containing the suitable spiritual ground to summon the Holy Grail.

The first key place was Mount Enzō which held the natural cavern, the “Dragon’s Hole”. At that place, the “Greater Holy Grail” – which used Justicia as a foundation –

was located. It was a secret altar known only to the three origin families, their favorite ever since it was prepared 180 years ago.

The Tōsaka family – which provided the ground – had the right to use the best spiritual leyline as their base. However, the prana overflowing from Mount Enzō was too powerful, and too dangerous to be used as a living ground to bring up the next generation of magi. Hence, they set up their stronghold at the next best spiritual leyline – the Tōsaka residence of today. Though inferior to the Greater Holy Grail, this place was sustained by sufficient spiritual power to summon the Holy Grail.

The Makiri were assigned to a ground when they migrated here, but because they realized that the spiritual aura of the ground was not suitable for the family's element, they shifted their base, the Matō residence, to a different place. The original spiritual leyline was protected by the Holy Church who intervened later. Today, it was at the top of the hill on which Fuyuki Church was built – that was the third spiritual leyline. Far away from Mount Enzō, it was located at the outskirts of Shinto, which was at the opposite side of the river – however, it was not much inferior to the second best spiritual ground.

The fourth spiritual leyline did not exist in this ground originally – because of spiritual processing by the other three spiritual leylines, the flow of mana subtly induced an anomaly; forming a gathering spot after 100 odd years, which appeared at a certain location as a result of it. It could also be called a subsequent spiritual ground. Through subsequent investigations, the fact that it was sufficiently furnished with spiritual grounds to carry out the ceremony, was confirmed; and during the third Holy Grail War, it was marked as a candidate site. Today, this place was located at the centre of the developing residential area of Shinto. Nevertheless, there was a problem with it, in that a council meeting hall was just built recently on that spot.

Even if Kotomine Kirei had taken possession of the "vessel of the Holy Grail", in the end, he had to perform the ceremony at one of these four key spiritual grounds. If Kiritsugu went to those places, set up traps and could ambush him, then there was a high chance of turning the tables around.

With Fuyuki Church left unoccupied, Kiritsugu unexpectedly landed in a good position of being able to secure the Tōsaka residence and the Fuyuki Church – the second and third best spiritual leylines. The silver lining of the cloud; in order to use this to his fullest advantage, all the way till morning, Kiritsugu planted explosives into

the two buildings, making them into traps. And then, since noon, he had set up a new position at Ryūdōji Temple, and was on the lookout all the time.

Kiritsugu anticipated that Kirei would probably choose Mount Enzō as the ceremonial place. His enemy had vanished from Fuyuki Church. Naturally there was also a possibility that his intention was to seclude himself from society, but for him to relinquish the spiritual leyline he had already secured in the first place, he would only want to perform the ceremony at the best spiritual ground – Kiritsugu thus conjectured. If he thought about it, after obliterating Tokiomi Tōsaka, his residence was also at Kirei's disposal – but he had left that place readily, so what's left was just the Greater Holy Grail at Mount Enzō.

Obviously, there was a non-zero possibility that all of these were just a bluff to mislead Kiritsugu, and that Kirei would return to Fuyuki Church or Tōsaka residence. However, because of that, Kiritsugu had already set traps so that if Kirei set foot in any of the buildings, he would not be able to return alive. After being bombed to death, if the "vessel of the Holy Grail" was still unharmed, then victory would easily be his – as for Irisviel's life, Kiritsugu had already looked philosophically upon it as a loss.

If he were to further increase his chances of outwitting Kirei, he could not disregard the Fuyuki council hall – the fourth spiritual leyline. As for that place, Kiritsugu settled on placing a familiar there for the purpose of surveillance. After being confirmed as being a spiritual ground, the "ground of origin" was left just like that without any spell-like defense being set up around it. Compared with the other three ceremonial sites – which were "hard to attack and easy to defend" – the council hall was not a strategic position at all, from the view of magi battles.

Hypothetically speaking, if Kotomine Kirei were to appear at the city council hall, then Kiritsugu would carry out a full-front assault. It was of course the worst development, but the risk of such a thing happening was also the lowest. If he acted according to priorities, whether he was right or wrong, the place he had to seize no matter what was Mount Enzō.

If Maiya was not harmed, she would be able to secure the city council hall, and confront Kirei directly with her perfect preparations. But, it was futile to lament about it. At this point, he could only rely on himself.

Suddenly, Kiritsugu recalled those times after he had lost Natalia. Come to think of it, his experiences of independent action without joining anyone, was surprisingly little.

To have felt that unexpectedly, was it because Kiritsugu was always the one surviving in the end?

Kiritsugu thought about it, and felt that he had led a life distantly connected to the word “alone”. It could also be called a life much crueler than being alone. There was always someone beside Kiritsugu. The one making excuses all this while for killing or causing the deaths of those “someones” was again, Kiritsugu.

Both Maiya and Irisviel were people he was destined to part with ever since he met them. Sure enough, as he thought, Kiritsugu was left on his own, trying to enter the final stage of the battle. To begin this way, and to end this way – this had to be Emiya Kiritsugu’s fate. Someone like him who had lost so many people – such absurdity was unforgivable.

–The boundary field established at the temple gates sensed the presence of something approaching. Kiritsugu cut off his disorganized emotions, held his Calico submachine gun in his hands, and stealthily examined the grounds. Nevertheless, his caution was not necessary. Kiritsugu already knew the prana waves which approached him.

Come to think of it, there was someone – who was the strongest reinforcement to him – that had not joined his side as an ally yet. At that fact, despite himself, Kiritsugu could not help but to be surprised and snigger. She was still alive. Though it was hard to decide that if this noble knight – which was not part of Kiritsugu’s tactics – joined him, whether she would be an “ally” or not.

Though hidden, a Servant could not be mistaken about her own Master’s whereabouts. Saber was not lost, and she had come all the way to the front of the treetop at which Kiritsugu was hiding himself, and had stopped within a distance from which they could talk, but outside the perimeter at which they could exchange blows – a delicate distance indeed. A distance too far for intimate words to be exchanged between them; that was also the distance separating the hearts of this Master and his Servant.

The slender figure in suit was as imposing as ever, but the exhaustion within her face could not be concealed. As a Heroic Spirit, physical fatigue was nothing to her; but the excessive exhaustion due to her worrying was a completely different matter. The commanding glint in her eyes during those times when she was waiting upon Irisviel, was evidently losing its force.

“ – Since yesterday night, I had been searching all over the streets for Irisviel. But, I still haven’t discovered anything……I’m very sorry.”

The Servant he did not think about and had left behind; Kiritsugu had no interest at all at how much time she had wasted within a night; and when he heard about her idle actions which were just as he expected, he could not even think of any words to answer her.

Even now Saber’s aim was still to “rescue Irisviel”.

From last midnight till this morning, within this time when Kiritsugu had steadily prepared the deathtraps for Kotomine Kirei, this Servant had probably sought Irisviel recklessly, and drove around in the city looking for her without even any hint of where she was.

Was that the willpower as a knight? The naively honest loyalty towards someone she had once served? …… Her actions were just a silly plan with no strategic planning whatsoever. But at the same time, it was also a stinging criticism towards Kiritsugu who had resigned to the death of his wife, and changed his strategies accordingly.

Needless to say, she did not come all the way to this place to mock him. Saber was just stopping by at Ryūdōji temple as part of her search for Irisviel, and sensed the presence of her Master. But to have to see her again the second day, and having to once again face the difference between their principles and their actions, he could do nothing but to ascertain all the more the conflicting principles between both of them.

From the dim shadows of the tree, at that cold look from Kiritsugu, the dry premonition she felt within her heart returned. – Perhaps, even until the end of the war, she would not have the chance to respectably exchange a single word with her own Master.

“……Well then, I will continue the search for Irisviel. If there’s anything, summon me with the Command Seals like last time.”

After saying that, Saber returned to the temple grounds. Needless to say, she was neither called back, nor were there any words of appreciation before her departure.

From the viewpoint of the Holy Grail contest, Kiritsugu’s actions was the best plan – Even Saber herself understood that. Because of that, she could also decide without a doubt that it was safe to leave this place to him. She had no fear of leaving

Kiritsugu alone. If the situation arose when the Servant was needed, the compelling force of the Command Seals could transcend even space and summon her to his side – she had already experienced that last night, and confirmed it.

Whilst descending the flight of stone steps connecting the temple gate to the ground below, Saber squinted her eyes in the unpleasantly blazing sun.

The enemies to be killed could not be found, and the location of the one she was to protect could not be ascertained…… what's left was just her definite intuition, which told her that she could not afford to waste a single moment.

Not even knowing where to go, she was spurred on from the inside by the tingling impatience.

-16:05:37

The scorching summer heat, unusual for the season, had nothing to do with Kotomine Kirei.

The ice-cold humid air sank into the darkness and was completely isolated from the bustling world outside. His location possessed all the ideal properties that would allow him to wait till night had fallen and then make his move.

The temporary hiding place that Kotomine Kirei, who had left the Fuyuki Church, had chosen was the blood-covered underground cavern that Uryū Ryūnosuke and Servant Caster had once occupied as their headquarters – that is, the water tank deep within the Fuyuki City sewage system. Moreover, this was the fated place where the Assassins he had summoned had been utterly humiliated. It was truly ironic that it was that memory which made Kotomine Kirei choose this hiding place.

The best testimony to the secrecy of this place was the fact that Caster, who had become the target of all Masters after Risei's command, had managed to stay alive here after the chaotic battle in the Einsbern Forest. Rider and his Master were the only ones who had found and entered this place, but there was longer any reason for them to pay attention to Caster's workshop.

After ensuring his own safety, Kirei reviewed the current situation of the war.

On top of having eliminated Tōsaka Tokiomi, befriended Matō Kariya, and secured the Vessel of the Grail, he had also managed to keep Saber and Rider in a stalemate whilst his own whereabouts were unknown to all –

All this was achieved within one day after his decision to return to the Heaven's Feel.

Although luck did play its part, nothing in the world was meant to be perfect. Even Kirei himself was surprised at the fact that he had immediately changed the chaotic and senseless situation of the war.

Kirei had usurped and taken over the advantage Tōsaka Tokiomi had possessed at the beginning of the war. Archer, who had materialized into this world as the most powerful Servant in this Heaven's Feel, was in Kirei's hands. Berserker, who was a formidable enemy due to his natural differences with Archer, had also become Kirei's puppet along with his Master. There was nothing else that could threaten Kotomine Kirei.

It didn’t matter who emerged victorious between Saber and Rider. The battle amongst Servants would end as soon as the victor was eliminated by Archer’s ultimate Noble Phantasm. On the off chance that both the King of Knights and the King of Conquerors managed to survive – or worse, if they came to an agreement and joined forces against him – then there was still the powerful Berserker to stop them. Although Matō Kariya was almost in ruins after the incident with Aoi, Berserker would automatically start attacking Saber and would not require his Master’s command.

Although Kirei knew that having three or four battle plans ready for the potentially unpredictable fight with Rider would be good enough, Archer did not agree to it. This battle did not belong to Kirei, but the King of Heroes. Kirei needed to respect the wish of the warriors if they desired a face-to-face rivalry. This was likely the biggest difference between Kirei and the other magi, who merely used Servants as tools.

He was opposed to using even a single Command Seal on Archer. He would only get the opposite result if he forced a man with such a huge ego to serve another’s will. The best way was not to control this Servant as a pawn, but to use him as if he were an environmental condition, like the weather or the direction of the wind. A sailor could not control the wind, but he could dexterously control his boat using the sail. That was his reasoning.

Archer had left for the moment because he didn’t like being locked up in this underground place. Kirei understood that Archer would rush back when necessary, so he did not feel uneasy in the leasts. Kirei did not regard this King of Heroes as a familiar, but as an accomplice with mutual interests.

In other words, there were more efficient ways to use the Command Seals he had taken from Risei’s hand. Even if Kirei possessed no Magic Crests, there were many ways for him to perform magecraft provided he paid the proper price. His chances of victory were high even if he were to fight an expert magus now.

The final battle tonight between Servants will decide the Holy Grail’s final destination. As an onlooker, all Kirei needed to do was wait for the right opportunity. As a Master, his main concern was actually a battle of strategies beyond that of the Servants’ – Kirei’s greatest enemy would be in that battle.

Emiya Kiritsugu. He would be the only one still capable of taking away the advantage in Kirei’s hands at this stage.

In his heart, Kirei had always looked forward to the duel with him. However, since the opponent was a thorough assassin, the kind of encounter that Kirei wished for would never come about. He would have to frequently consider the situation of the battle and continue to ensure his advantage if he were to create a scenario in which he could fight Emiya Kiritsugu face to face. If Kiritsugu took the upper hand, Kirei would definitely be finished without ever seeing what his opponent looked like. If that were to happen, then all would have been for naught.

Emiya Kiritsugu could not obtain information concerning this water tank. He was reassured of that. Had that not been the case, Uryū Ryūnosuke would have been eliminated even sooner than he had. He would not suffer a sudden attack from Kiritsugu as long as he remained hidden here. For now, all he needed to do was keep his opponent worrying and running around blindly. Kirei would be the one to decide the location of the duel.

Kiritsugu operated strictly according to logic. Kirei would predict his moves and turn that logic against him, misleading him until he had no choice but to volunarily appear before Kirei – that goal was already finalized. All that was left was to wait for night to fall.

Kirei cast his eyes to a corner of the darkness when he heard a painful moan. The Einsbern homunculus that he had gotten Berserker to kidnap was lying there face-up. She wasn't lying there naturally; a simple Magic Circle had been drawn around her to allow the surrounding prana to flow in. Although this location was not above a leyline, there was still leftover prana gathered here from when Caster had greedily devoured the souls of those he had sacrificed. Putting aside whether this supply made her comfortable, it was enough to stabilize her condition.

Of course, it would have been easy if he were to simply cut open her abdomen now and take out the 'Vessel of the Grail'. However, Kirei wished for a chance to speak with her. That was why he was wasting his effort to provide her with prana.

"Can you hear me, woman?"

"…"

The homunculus opened her eyes, breathing faintly. Her empty gaze was without focus and her eyesight had evidently diminished, but she still recognized the voice of her nemesis.

"Kotomine… Kirei. Like I thought, you're the one…"

“The victor of the Heaven’s Feel is about to be decided. Perhaps I will be the one to complete the ancient wish of your Einsbern house.”

Although he was not confident enough to declare absolute victory, such a conclusion was a conservative estimate.

“You still have an attitude and are so uncooperative. Are you so displeased with me?”

“Of course… There’s only one person I will entrust the Holy Grail to… and that would never be you, Executor.”

Although she found it difficult even to speak, the hatred and power in her voice made Kirei furrow his brows.

“I don’t understand. You’re nothing but a doll that carries the Holy Grail. The completion of the ceremony should be your only concern, rather than who may win the war. Why are you so bent on certain Masters in your current condition?”

“Yes, how could you possibly understand?... You’re the kind of person who doesn’t even have a wish to bestow upon the Holy Grail.”

The loathing mockery made Kirei even more baffled – was this woman really just a homunculus? Why did a homunculus, which didn’t even have a soul, possess such emotions?

“Kotomine Kirei… you’re an empty man who doesn’t even understand the meaning of battle. You’ll never win against that man… Be prepared; my knight, my husband will surely destroy you…”

“… Why are you talking about me?”

What made Kirei more baffled was the content of her words. How could this homunculus look into his heart with such accuracy? Tokiomi could not do that, nor could his own father or wife.

“Hah, scared? Fine, I’ll tell you… Emiya Kiritsugu has seen through you. He is alarmed by you and therefore regards you as the greatest enemy … Kiritsugu will fall upon you in a way more cruel and merciless than anyone else. Be prepared…”

So that was why – Kirei nodded with satisfaction.

If it was that man – if those who could understand Kirei truly existed – then that man must be the same kind of person as Kirei.

Emiya Kiritsugu did not let him down. Though the two of them had never met, he had nevertheless made the most appropriate evaluation of Kotomine Kirei.

“Thank you, woman. That is a blessing for me. The man Emiya Kiritsugu is truly just as I had imagined.”

However, a bout of mocking laughter answered Kirei.

“… You’re such a foolish man. You’re saying you understand Emiya Kiritsugu? … Hmph, don’t make me laugh. You aren’t even up to his heel in worth.”

“– What did you say?”

The sudden sound made his entire body shiver. He could not forget that sentence.

“True… Emiya Kiritsugu can see through you, but you’ll never see through him… Kotomine Kirei, you don’t have any of the things that man has in his soul.”

Kirei grasped her slender neck before more mocking words could flow out of her throat. The rage and confusion swirling within Kirei’s heart at that moment was incomparable to what he had felt back in the Einsbern Forest even if the fatal battle there was to be repeated.

“… I admit it. True, I’m an empty man. I have nothing.”

His roaring seemed to be calm at the beginning, or maybe traces of agitation only surfaced later on.

“But what’s the difference between Kiritsugu and me? Between me and that man who only devoted himself to senseless war – a man who never got anything out of it but only repeated his slaughter?! He departed so much from common sense and he got absolutely nothing. What is he, if not a lost soul!?!”

Kirei rebuked her desperately and hoarsely.

His inquiry was like the angry roar of an anguished soul that could not obtain the answer it sought even after having experienced every kind of trial imaginable.

“Homunculus, answer me if you can. Why does Emiya Kiritsugu seek the Holy Grail? What is the wish that man bestowed upon the all-powerful wish-granting vessel!?!”

As if provoking her, Kirei loosened his hands, which were grasped around the homunculus’s neck, and permitted her to breathe so she could answer him. There was an unspoken warning that if he received a vague answer, he would end her breathing forever.

Even so, this woman did not express even a sliver of terror. Kneeling before Kirei's knees, she weakly gasped for oxygen in such a pitiful manner. But the look that she gave Kirei still contained the derision and superiority reserved for the victor.

It was almost as if Kirei was the one kneeling.

"Alright, I'll tell you – Emiya Kiritsugu's lasting hope is to save humanity. It is to end all wars and bloodshed and achieve eternal world peace."

That only seemed like jestful nonsense for Kirei. After a few seconds, he burst out laughing.

"– What was that?"

"You can't understand it. That is the difference between you and him. You believe in nothing while he does."

Was this woman really talking about the man Emiya Kiritsugu? Kirei had doubts. What kind of man did Emiya Kiritsugu pretend to be while in front of this woman?

"… Woman, what are you to Emiya Kiritsugu?"

"I gave birth to his child as his wife. I've looked into his heart and shared his worries for the past nine years… unlike you, who has never seen him."

Nine years. Perhaps he had passed such a long time in a lie? Kirei had such doubts, but he instinctively felt it would be impossible. What existed in this woman's heart was undoubtedly her trust toward Emiya Kiritsugu. It would be unimaginable to form such a strong personality within her if she based it on an empty lie. This woman was originally only an ordinary homunculus after all.

The focus of his anger began to shift away from this woman before her. Kirei gave out a melancholic sigh and sat down onto the chair next to him.

"Irisviel von Einsbern, were you always a good wife in those nine years? Did you win Emiya Kiritsugu's love?"

"… Why do you care?"

"I don't understand the bond between you two – you took pride in having Emiya Kiritsugu as your husband and trust him as if you're a real couple. However, if Emiya Kiritsugu is a man who seeks the Holy Grail, you should have been just a tool with which to fulfill his wish. He has no reason to give you something as unnecessary as love."

“… I won’t forgive you if you laugh at him for being stupid.”

Those were the decisive words spoken by one who had something that could not be violated.

“… I have no parents, and I’m not a product of love. Therefore, I can’t understand what a ‘good wife’ is. Even so… the love he gave me is my entire world. No one can humiliate that.”

“Then, Irisviel, you’re a perfect wife.”

Kirei said as if making a disinterested judgement. It was not praise, nor was it sarcasm.

“But I can’t understand Emiya Kiristugu because of that. Since he loves you as a wife, then why… why would he want eternal world peace? Why would he sacrifice his loved one for such a pointless aspiration?”

“… Such an odd question. For you, a man who has admitted that he has no reason for existence… You’re mocking others and saying their aspirations are meaningless?”

“Any sensible adult would have laughed at him.”

This was an anger completely different from before. Kirei’s heart swelled up.

“Combat is instinctive of humanity. Eliminating it is no different from eliminating humans. What else could be more pointless? This so-called aspiration of Emiya Kiritsugu’s – it shouldn’t have been called an aspiration to begin with, but the dream of a child!”

“… That is why he could only rely on a miracle…”

Irisviel tried her best to keep her cool and continued speaking.

“He lost everything for the aspiration he sought… He always suffered through his punishments for wanting to save those that could not be saved, and everything around him was robbed… I am also someone taken away from him. He has been forced to discard his loved ones many times…”

Kirei stood up from his chair and gazed at Irisviel with a bottomless and gloomy look.

“You’re saying it’s not just limited to this once – but that this is the way of existence for this man?”

“Yes. Kiritsugu is far too gentle. He doesn’t hold back on his love even though he knows he will lose those around him sooner or later…”

Those answers were enough for Kirei. He completely lost interest in the homunculus before him.

“… I understand.”

He grasped the woman’s neck with his strong fingertips and stopped her blood flow.

Looking at the other’s weak and painful expression, Kirei calmly said.

“I finally understand. So this is Emiya Kiritsugu.”

Kirei threw the woman, who had already fainted, to one side, and gazed emptily into the darkness.

In retrospect, Kirei had been wrong since the start– his question was answered, but his anticipation became disappointment.

Emiya Kiritsugu was not looking for the truth amongst meaningless repetition.

That man had simply consigned all meaningful things into nothingness.

It wasn’t that he had no wishes, but that he had such a ridiculous wish that he fell into a cycle of nothingness. His futile efforts and what he had wasted was so foolish that it was unsalvageable.

Perhaps Kiritsugu could see through Kotomine Kirei’s empty heart, and perhaps he would fear that emptiness and be alarmed. However, he would never be able to imagine the meaning of having such an emptiness. He could never hope to understand the fervent desire that Kirei harbored.

Emiya Kiritsugu’s life could be concluded as having repeatedly discarded everything.

The joy and happiness that man had discarded – even its fragments were important enough in Kirei’s eyes for him to protect with his life or even die for.

For a man like Kirei who continued to be lost and could not find a single piece of such joy and happiness, Kiritsugu’s life only existed in his dreams and his admiration.

His insatiable thirst and unrecoverable loss had been belittled and mocked in such a way – how could he endure this? How could he not hate this?

The dark feelings swelling up in his heart twisted Kirei’s smile.

He finally understood the meaning of this war.

He had absolutely no interest in the Holy Grail. It did not matter if he had no thoughts of fulfilling a wish.

But if he could break the dreams of this man, who had gambled everything upon this miracle, with his own hands – then even the Holy Grail, which was completely meaningless to him, had a use in being obtained.

The excitement of approaching battle made Kirei's hands tremor. The rising desire of battle burned in his heart, as if he were about to take out his Black Keys right then and pierce through everything in front of him.

In the darkness muddied by the stench of blood, Kotomine Kirei laughed out loud. It was something that had never ceased in all these long years - the throbbing of his soul.

-04:16:49

Waver woke from a deep and dreamless sleep.

What he saw, when he opened his eyes, was a blackness like that of sleep. The thicket in which he had fallen asleep during the daytime was now completely mired in a hazily starlit darkness.

The curtain of night descended again. To those who commanded Servants, this was a time of battle that could not be avoided.

The night wind, as bitter cold as the intent to murder, did not make him uneasy in the slightest; right beside him was a presence that could make his fear and unease vanish into thin air.

Rider, who had already materialized, had already made a thorough preparation for battle and was currently flipping through his anthology of Homer's poetry.

This hardcover, so heavy and depressing to Waver, was small and thin in the eyes of the King of Conquerors. The large man was completely immersed in the world of words. As he flipped through the book, his gestures were enthusiastic; he especially cherished details as minute as the touch under his fingertips.

It looked as if he was really very fond of that book. Waver could not help but smile wryly. If he were to suddenly ask Rider, "Why were you born to this world?" perhaps his reply might not be his ambition to conquer the world, but, "Without fingers, I would be unable to read this anthology of Homer's poetry." That was the sort of person this man was. A hero whose heart yearned for something far away, who enjoyed good food and wine, who regarded his ambition of conquering the world to be as common a desire as eating or sleeping. This peculiar personality had drawn many men to follow him for a lifetime.

In human history, such a man had existed.

"—Nn? Kid, are you awake?"

Though Rider had already read Achilles' adventures countless times before, his interest was nevertheless undiminished. He smiled like a mischievous child as he looked at Waver. Perhaps he would always show this smile, no matter whom it was for. No matter if it was for the heroes with which he had lived and died side by side, or for a Master with no redeeming qualities, like Waver.

"… Didn't I tell you to wake me as soon as it was night? What exactly are you doing?"

“Ah, sorry. I got engrossed in reading without realizing it. But the night is still young. I don't think we have to be so anxious tonight; just facing it while at ease will be alright.”

“Why?”

The subsequent question caused the large man to open his mouth, then fall into thought.

“… Oh. In any case, I don't have any proof, but I have a premonition that there can be a decisive battle tonight.”

He said as if there was no problem.

Waver nodded lightly and did not question Rider's reasoning. He could not explain why, but the air that brushed against his skin made him feel like the Heaven’s Feel had entered a climactic stage.

If it had to be put in words—then it was because the air tonight was too peaceful.

As far as Waver knew, the only eliminated opponents were Assassin, whom Rider had personally crushed, and Caster, who had been defeated at Mion River. But of course, in places he could not see, the battle was still ongoing, still developing.

Every day and night he could feel that the unusual presences appearing in this town were changing, shifting from a chaotic commotion to a heavy sense of urgency.

This was also one of the reasons why the impatience he felt now left less of an imprint in his mind than the anxiety caused by Saber, with whom they had fought last night. It seemed that an emergency situation had also emerged in the Einsbern camp.

Therefore, Waver did not say anything to contradict Rider’s instinct. It was precisely because he was the King of Conquerors who had galloped through innumerable battlefields and issued commands and strategies that his sixth sense was much more reliable than that of Waver, who lacked experience.

Whether Lord El-Melloi was still alive and well—now, news concerning his once hated enemy only made him feel vaguely sad.

Waver had already experienced the unimaginably difficult self-cultivation required to rush forth into battle with a Heroic Spirit. Even though he had a reputation for genius in the area of thaumaturgy, the Heaven’s Feel could not be surmised according to

the logic of magi. When he considered that there had once been a time when El-Melloi had undergone the same difficult self-cultivation, he felt satisfied—and yet at the same time a thread of sympathy could not help but appear in his heart. Among the six Masters, Kayneth alone had shared a connection with Waver, regardless of whether that relationship had been good or bad.

That such feelings could be evoked in him towards an opponent with whom he had fought bitterly since they had first met—Waver once again felt the change in the workings of his heart.

——Yes; no matter what the premonition was, to him, the Heaven's Feel was as good as ended.

The moment he began to sigh, a light yet distinct impact dispersed his drowsiness.

"What—is this?"

"This surge of prana is very strange. Like I have encountered it before."

Hearing Rider say this, Waver remembered. The smoke signal with which the Holy Church had summoned the Masters. This was exactly the same feeling as then.

To get a look at the sky, he walked out of the thicket; to the northeast appeared a flash of magical lightning, accompanied by colors even brighter than those of the first summons.

"This shape is…"

"What is this? A sort of sign?"

Hearing Rider's question, Waver—though unsure—still nodded his head.

"Differently colored light, four and seven… It is 'Emperor' , accomplishment, and 'Chariot', victory. To give this sort of signal… Unless this means that the winner of the Heaven's Feel has already been determined?"

Waver's explanation made Rider furrow his brow.

"What is this? Treating me as if I don't exist? Exactly who is it that has taken the victory?"

This was truly strange. In the Heaven's Feel, only by eliminating all enemy Masters and Servants could victory be counted. But as things were, Rider and Waver were standing right there; how could the declaration of victory be made?

“… Also, that position is not where Fuyuki Church is. Very strange. Maybe it's not a signal from the people from the Church.”

“Ah. If you put it that way, that's a possibility I can accept.”

Hearing Waver’s doubt, Rider snorted disdainfully through his nose and nodded his head.

“Wh—what’s the matter?”

“It must be that some impatient fellow has taken it upon himself to make the declaration of victory with the challenge, ‘If you object, then come here.’ In other words, it is meant to draw opponents to the decisive battleground that he himself designates.”

Rider gave a sinister laugh. Staring at the smoke signal shining in the sky, he seemed to be saying, ‘That coincides with my own intentions.'

“Very good, very good. Now I can even be saved of the effort of searching. I don’t think a single Servant will be able to sit still after receiving this sort of challenge. The guys who are still alive will definitely all gather around the place where the smoke signal was sent out—hn, like I thought, tonight is the time of the decisive battle.”

The King of Conquerors’s burly frame was trembling with joy and fighting spirit.

Waver regarded the strong and brave Heroic Spirit with an icy gaze, as if waiting and watching from a distance.

“Is it? Finally the last phase.”

“That’s right. Since the battleground has already been decided, I cannot bring shame to the class of Rider.”

Rider drew the Celtic longsword and raised it high into the sky.

“Appear, my precious horse!”

Accompanying the call, a radiance that pierced through space shone forth from within the torn void. Shining with the light of Heroic Spirits appeared a steed Waver was familiar with.

The hoofed Heroic Spirit horse, Bucephalus. The precious legendary horse that had once carried the King of Conquerors to trample upon the eastern world. Today, it passed through time to return to the side of its ‘ally’. As it sped across the tarred road, it gave a cry of thirst for battle.

Alexander's trump card 'Ionian Hetairoi' required the opening of a Reality Marble to correct interference from the world if its various aspects were to be gathered together. Nonetheless, like Mithrenes, who had taken on the role of messenger at Mion River, if only a single horse and rider which were to appear, then it was within the boundaries of ordinary space. Having lost 'Gordius Wheel', the best place for Rider to unleash his riding skill was now on 'its' back.

"Come, kid. Even if it's not as stable as sitting in the charioteer's seat, put up with it for a while. Come up here."

Rider, on the back of his beloved horse, nudged his body backward to make space for Waver. Nevertheless, Waver smiled wryly and shook his head.

Only heroes were qualified to ride on the back of a steed that was second to none in the entire world. It was definitely not a place to be taken by ordinary youngsters.

For instance, a useless magus who could not even cast a hypnosis spell, the most basic of basics—

Or for instance, a clown who overrated himself and only got in the way of the despotic path of the King—

The glorious road on which the King of Conquerors Alexander was about to rush forth could not be arbitrarily sullied.

Waver understood that—the night before—it had been he, the Master, who had at the last moment caused Rider's determination to challenge Saber to end in vain. At that time, if Rider had challenged the 'Sword of Promised Victory' with a desperate heart, then perhaps he would have been victorious over Saber's Noble Phantasm by a small distance and trampled the King of Knights beneath the hooves of the divine bulls. The reason why he could not but give up at the decisive moment—had been the Master standing beside him in the driver's seat. At the last instant, Rider could only jump from the chariot in order to protect the clown beside him. Of course, he could not sacrifice the contractor who had made him appear in this world. At that time, what had decided the victory between Rider and Saber had been whether or not their Master had been at their side.

Waver Velvet had once thought he had what it took to become a victor, and had been complacent about it.

But now it was different. Now, after two weeks had passed, after he had personally witnessed true heroes; now, as he understood his own useless and meager existence.

A dog without a home has its own intentions as well. At the very least, it can gaze upon that back, the nobility of which it can never match—

“My Servant. I, Waver Velvet, use a Command Seal to give this order.”

The youth raised his tightly clenched right hand, displaying the Command Seals that were as yet unused. These were the shackles that bound the Heroic Spirit before his eyes, the greatest obstacle that blocked his despotic road.

“Rider, you must take the final victory.”

This was not a restriction, only a judgment that was a matter of course. Therefore, Waver gave the order. His heart was light as he watched the first of the Command Seals unleash its prana and disappear.

“Again I use a Command Seal to give this order—Rider, you must seize the Grail.”

The second Command Seal also vanished; he felt a thread of pain in his heart for this light. If he stayed his hand now, there would still be time—this meaningless confusion swept across his heart. It was a fool’s hesitation not worth mentioning.

“Lastly, I use a Command Seal to give this order.”

Waver resolutely raised the hand on which the last Command Seal was drawn, looking at the King who rode on the horse’s back. In that instant, Waver could meet his eyes without the slightest show of timidity. This was his last and only glory as a Master.

“Rider, you must seize the whole world. Failure is not allowed.”

Swiftly liberated, the third holy mark radiated hidden prana; summoning a whirlwind, it disappeared. Waver the magus would probably never again have the chance to perform such tremendous thaumaturgy in his life. But even thus, he felt from the bottom of his heart that this was the most satisfying action of his life. He had no regret whatsoever. In compensation for losing everything, this was enough.

Waver lowered his head to look at his own hands. The proof of the contract etched on his hand had already vanished and left no trace.

“And thus, I am no longer your Master.”

Waver said, looking at his feet with his head bowed. He did not want to know what expression Rider wore as he looked at him. Perhaps it was surprise at Waver's cowardly act of giving up the fight; perhaps it was a relieved smile at having been freed from the hands of a useless Master. Regardless of which it was, Waver did not want to see it. If it were possible, he even wished that Rider would forget the entire process of their encounter.

"Go. You can go anywhere, you are already…"

Oh, rang out the quiet reply.

Subsequently, he should hear the sound of a horse's hooves swiftly galloping away over the land. Even as Waver thought this, he was lifted by the collar. In the next instant, he was sitting on Bucephalus's back.

"Of course I will go at once—but, since you have given that annoying command, surely you are also determined? Come to witness the moment in which the order is fulfilled."

"You, you, you idiot! I say, eh!"

His will having been changed so easily, Waver cried out awkwardly. Bucephalus gave a rough cry through its nose as if mocking his panic. Even that horse mocked people in the same way as its rider—thinking this, driven by an indignation that even he did not understand, Waver cried out.

"I don't have Command Seals any more! I don't want to be a Master any more! Why do you still want to take me with you? I—"

"Whether you are or are not a Master, you are my friend, and that will never change."

Waver knew that these words, spoken along with the smile that was the same as always, had been spoken to him. In that instant, the hardest part of his heart crumbled—even though he had protected it with his life, only a moment was required to destroy it.

The tears flooded like a spring unending from his eyes, mixing with snot as they flowed past his nose; he found it difficult to breathe, and even more difficult to make a sound. Even so, he still asked in a choked voice.

"… I… someone like me… can… can I really… be by your side…?"

"After going forth into battle with me so many times, why are you saying all this? You idiot."

As if listening to jokes at a banquet, the King of Conquerors poked fun at the youth's tears. He slapped his thin, weak shoulders.

"Aren't you a real man who has faced enemies with me? So, you are a friend. Stick out your chest and stand shoulder to shoulder with me."

"…"

Waver forgot self-deprecation. He forgot the mortification before today, the timidity towards tomorrow, as well as the fear in the moment facing death.

'Fight and win'—this unshakable conviction took root in his heart.

There would be no failure, there would be no disgrace; now he was with the King, and as long as one believed and continued to run forth on the despotic road, one would set foot, no matter how unreliable those feet, on the edge of the world—this he firmly believed.

"So, I should make my answer to the first Command Seal now. Open your eyes wide and look properly, boy."

"Ah, I will definitely use this pair of eyes to watch!"

The legendary steed gave a cry of assured victory and began to gallop, carrying the King and magus whose hearts were linked, rushing towards the decisive battle with a mortal enemy.

The location indicated by the smoke signal was the opposite bank of the Mion river, the fourth leyline of Fuyuki.

-04:10:33

Fuyuki City Hall –

This structure, which had been built at the cost of eight billion yen, was considered the symbol of Fuyuki Shinto's development, along with the Central Building in front of the train station. It covered an area of 6600 square meters and had 4700 square meters of usable space. Its complex design housed four floors above ground and one floor below. The two-story music hall could accommodate about 3000 patrons. The building's prestigious architect had created a novel design that made this modern City Hall as majestic and splendid as an ancient shrine. Fuyuki City's high ambition toward Shinto's development could thus be seen in physical form.

However, only the exterior was complete. The interior was still being decorated in preparation for the commemoration ceremony. Active and practical use of the building was still a long way off. In addition to the minimal level of safety precautions, the building still had no access to electricity. Deep in the night, with no workers on site, this pristine and splendid building became an unreal space, with an inhuman silence and an alien feeling flowing and drifting through its emptiness.

Civil planning did not take magecraft into consideration. It was a complete coincidence that the City Hall had been built on top of Fuyuki's latest leyline – in other words, such a rare coincidence could only be attributed to the paranormal characteristics bestowed upon the area by the leyline.

Kotomine Kirei stood on the rooftop and calmly watched the magecraft signals he had set off as they scattered to smoke in the night wind. The only thing he had needed to do to infiltrate the unguarded building was break the lock. He had already made preparations for the ceremony and was ready to confront an attack. All that was left was to stay and wait for the remaining enemies to be attracted by the signal.

Battle was near, and yet he did not seem to be affected by the thought at all. Executors did not need to be excited with the prospect of bloodshed, nor did they need to jest to relieve the tension. They possessed the ideal characteristics of the tools of God's will, and would gallop toward death with hearts knowing only the routine completion of yet another duty. Long years of such training allowed Kirei to display the calm and nonchalance of a practicing surgeon.

However –

"Hmph. Your face tonight is as cold as ever, Kirei."

Archer, who was walking up to the rooftop with a relaxed gait, mocked him. Kirei laughed bitterly in his heart.

What did his face, emotionless as always, look like in the eyes of this Heroic Spirit who could see through everything? Even the shifts in his emotions that he himself could not detect were unable to escape from the Heroic Spirit's eyes.

Although his heart had wavered in the beginning, Kirei was used to it by now. Yes, he was a cold man in truth – he understood himself as though he was analyzing the business of another.

The King of Heroes, who had just returned from the night market in the street, still wore his flamboyant and luxurious casual clothing. A residual tint of indulgence remained in those crimson eyes, and he showed no sense of urgency at the approaching battle. However, this Heroic Spirit would never separate his outer appearance from his inner feelings. The battle surrounding the Holy Grail only seemed like child's play to him.

"What do you want me to do next, Kirei? Just wait here?"

One wrong command could make Archer question the worth of his Master. Kirei, who knew this very well, shook his head after having thought about it for a while.

"The ceremony will be in jeopardy if your power is released close to the Holy Grail. If you want to have fun, then attack head-on."

"Mm, fine. But what do you plan to do if you're attacked while I'm away?"

"Get Berserker to stall the enemies and I'll use that time to summon you back. I would have to borrow the power of the Command Seals, though. You wouldn't mind, would you?"

"It is permitted. However, I can't guarantee the safety of the Holy Grail. I won't be merciful tonight. This narrow little room may be completely destroyed."

"That would be the worst outcome, but it would also be fate."

Kirei nodded decisively, but Archer narrowed his eyes.

"Kirei, it looks as if you have understood the meaning of this war. But do you still not have a wish to bestow upon the Holy Grail? Not a single wish, even if you do manage to obtain the miracle?"

"That's right. What's wrong with that?"

“Although it’s yet to be completed, the ‘vessel’ is already in your hands. It may accept a ‘pre-ordered’ wish, you know.”

“… Hmm, I see. You’re saying that, if possible, a miracle can occur at the same time when the Holy Grail descends, right?”

Kirei sighed disinterestedly and thought about it for a while. In the end, he still shook his head.

“I still don’t have a wish. If I have to have one – then I wish for there not to be any innocent people meddling with us in the final battle. Unfortunately, there are residents all around us. I had wanted to fight for my victory somewhere desolate if possible.”

Hearing this completely boring answer, Gilgamesh said with derision.

“Hah, the thing hiding in your heart will only be truly understood in the presence of the Holy Grail.”

At the end of the day, even if those two were closer to the Holy Grail than anyone else, they also cared the least for it. For those two, compared to gaining the Holy Grail, it was more meaningful to chase away those who had gathered because of it.

“– Ah, there’s one more thing. If Saber appears before I return –”

As he was about to depart, the King of Heroes halted in his steps as if having suddenly thought of something.

“– Then let Berserker play with her for a little while. I saved that mad dog’s life just for this.”

“Understood.”

Kirei still could not figure out the reason why Archer was so bent on Saber. As for Berserker, who had longed to destroy the King of Heroes after their initial battle, things were different. The King of Heroes had allowed for Berserker’s continued existence after discovering his true name in his investigation of Matō Kariya. He had said, "It'll be entertaining to let that dog bite Saber.” The King of Heroes could always control his anger whenever it came to Saber; it seemed Gilgamesh was very interested in the King of Knights.

“Say, Kirei, how’s that doll, the one Saber protected at the risk of her life? I heard that whatchamacallit – Vessel of the Grail – is in it.”

“Ah, that's what you meant.”

Kirei did not want to mention its existence. His interest was gone at this stage; he did not even feel the need to remember the woman’s name.

“I just killed her. There was no longer any reason to keep her alive.”

※※※※※

Irisviel opened her eyes and looked around at her surroundings.

She felt very strange. Her consciousness was impeccably clear, and yet she could not think logically.

It seemed like it was not her mentality that had become muddled and nonsensical, but the world she was in.

Many scenes flashed past her eyes. When she beheld them, the only emotion that welled up within her heart was an unbearable sorrow and emptiness.

The scenes reflected in her eyes were eternally sundered from happiness or joy. That was the only constant in this kaleidoscope of confusion.

There was pain, there was humiliation, and there was regret, hatred, and loss.

Bloodshed and a desolate land. Betrayal and vengeance. Having devoted everything and yet receiving nothing in return – it was an expensive cycle that reaped no rewards.

The familiar snow-covered scene continued on.

It was recounting the story of a clan that had sealed all it possessed within a castle of deep winter.

And here she finally remembered – what she was looking down upon was the Einsbern family's thousand-year-long pilgrimage for the Holy Grail.

The primeval Justizia and the female dolls modeled after her… They were homunculi, fake living beings.

They were humanoid disposables created with the secret craft of alchemy and used to fulfill the unattainable lasting wish.

This lost and confused history of the Einsbern clan was written with their blood and tears as ink and their broken bones and frozen fingertips as pens. Their sighs and their despair made Irisviel's heart clench tight.

If any place had existed such that allowed her to see all of this, then it could only be the epicenter of the entire conflict, within the thing that had witnessed all.

Irisviel finally understood. She was looking inside the Holy Grail.

It was the Greater Grail that embraced the primeval Justizia, the Greater Grail of Mount Enzō. All homunculi were manufactured to the standard of the 'Lady of Winter', using her as their model. Therefore, they shared the same pain.

– No, was that really the truth?

"Why are you crying, Mother?"

When she came to, Irisviel discovered that she was in the room of her child, protected by the warmth of the fireplace.

Icy wind and snow gathered outside the window and the storm roared past. A pair of tiny hands clutched her mother's arms tightly in search of protection.

"Mother, Illya had a nightmare. I dreamed that I became a wine cup."

Although her heart was terrified, Illyaviel's two red eyes still looked at Irisviel with trust. Though her face looked the same as her mother's and all of her sisters', this child was different. She was more adorable than anyone else –

"There were seven big blocks in Illya's heart. When Illya felt like she was about to break and was so scared but couldn't run away, she heard Justizia-sama's voice, and there was a big black hole above my head…"

Iriviel embraced her daughter tightly. Her silver-white fringe brushed past her daughter's face, which was wet with tears.

"It's alright, it's alright… That won't happen. You won't see such things, Illya."

There was one sad wish that only Irisviel possessed out of her innumerable sisters and could not share with anyone else – and that was the maternal love of a 'Mother'.

Out of the many generations of homunculi, she had been the first to give birth to a child from her womb. Out of all of her kind, only she had been given a love for her child. But even so, the fate she carried was just as lamentable.

Illyasviel von Einsbern was the next Vessel of the Grail, and also a mechanical part swept up in the thousand-year-old cogwheel of delusion and stubbornness.

This shackle would not break until someone claimed victory.

The Third Magic, the Cup of Heaven – that achievement was the only salvation.

Many sounds rushed towards Irisviel. She chanted with her countless sisters.

The Holy Grail –

Please grant the Holy Grail into my hands –

Deep within the forest, where the used homunculi were discarded, the mountain of corpses composed of her kin chanted. Those rotten, maggot-infested faces overlapped with Illya's young and small face, and emitted those painful sounds.

"It's alright –"

Full of love, the mother hugged her daughter tightly in her arms.

"Illya, you'll definitely be freed from this shackle of fate. I will finish everything. Your daddy will definitely fulfill this wish as well…"

At that moment, a question suddenly flashed past her thoughts.

If this was a dream conjured by the Holy Grail – since she could see the 'Vessel' within so clearly and it had taken shape – then what would Irisviel, who served as the outer cover, look like now?

It was as if the eggshell could see the innards of the chick.

If so, then this would be a giant contradiction. The shell was supposed to break when the chick hatched.

Then – who was the Irisviel that was dreaming?

The touch of Illyasviel's slender body, which she was hugging tightly, was so realistic. Irisviel looked to her own hands, which were hugging her daughter.

Irisviel had already disappeared. If the chick had consumed the broken shell…

The falling snow outside the window suddenly stopped. What melted into the darkness of the night was a thick black mud that stirred up ripples.

She wasn't scared, nor was she surprised; she only comprehended it calmly and gazed upon it. The mud seeped in from all corners of the room and dripped from the chimney, slowly soaking the ground under her feet.

Yes, the question of ‘who am I?’ was so minuscule.

She had been no one since the start. Even now, she was still ‘someone’ who used the personality of Irisviel, a woman who had already disappeared, as a mask.

Even so, Irisviel’s wish, hidden in her heart, remained true. It was the wish of a mother who thought of her beloved daughter and lamented the future of her child even as she drew her last breath and passed away. She had inherited the wish of this mother.

Therefore, she was the one who must fulfill that wish.

She was the existence that had been worshipped and anticipated because she was to grant everyone’s wish, because she was made to be the one.

“– It’s alright, Illyasviel, everything is about to end.”

Gently, she murmured beside the ear of the young girl, whom she was embracing for the first time.

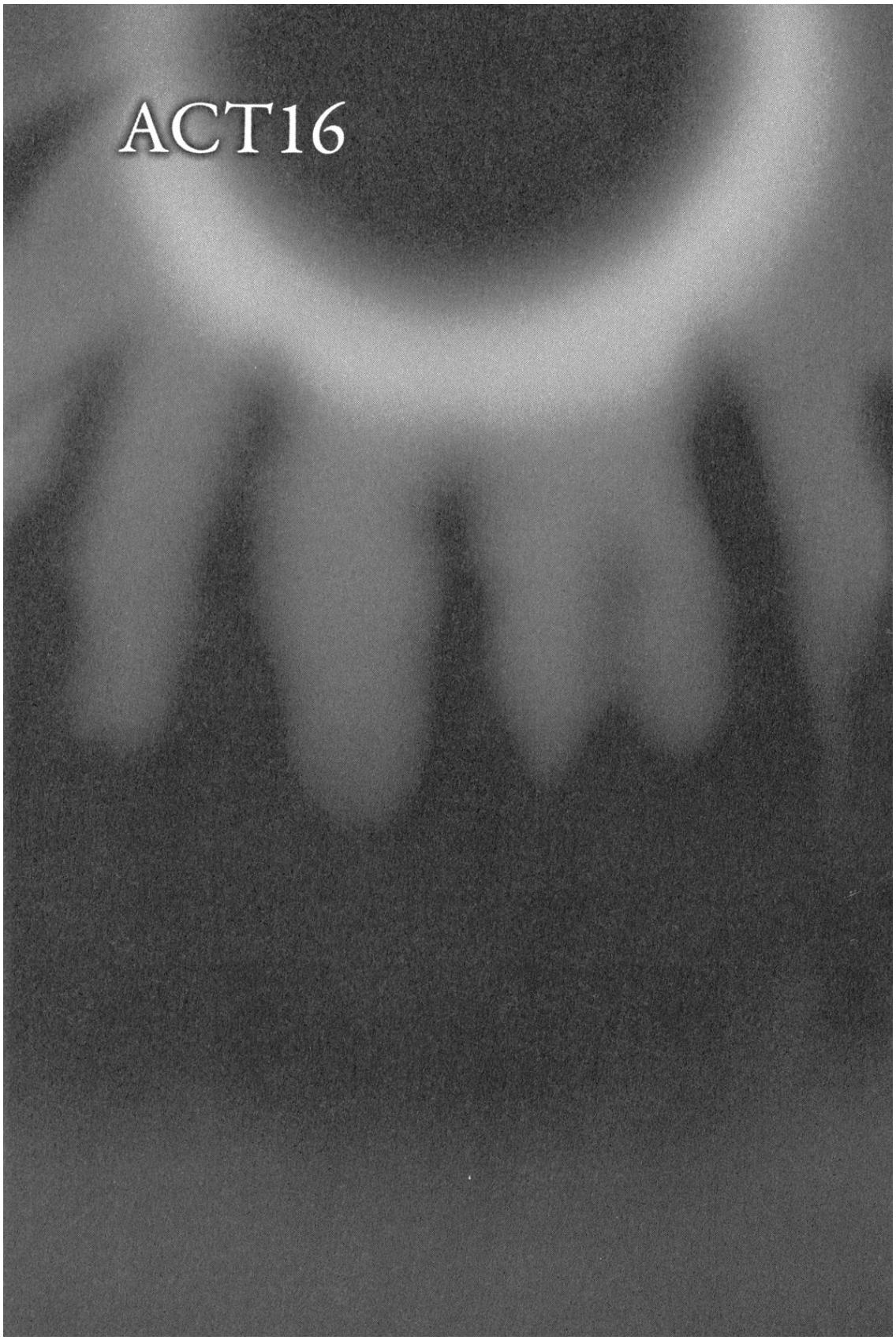
“So let us wait here awhile. Father will definitely come. He’ll come to help us fulfill all of our wishes.”

The scorching mud that clung tightly to her had elegantly dyed her skirt black.

As she waited for the moment when the wish would be granted, the woman with her body entangled in the inky darkness smiled.

Dispel all sorrows and chase away all worries.

Soon, she would receive the power to fulfill wishes and become the omnipotent wish-granting vessel that could realize all.


ACT16

Act 16

-04:08:29

Two o'clock A.M. -

The streets fell asleep into a silence deeper and more complete than usual. Even the resident night-owls - perhaps terrified by the repeated cases - obeyed the appeal to self-imposed curfews and were submissively drawn into their homes. Even the shadows of cars disappeared from the road's surface. The asphalt, clearly lit by street lights alone, was frozen by the air of the winter night.

This townscape where human life had completely ceased looked like it belonged in a scene with toys stretched to life-size. If a place beyond the recognition of normal humans was called an 'alien world', then that was, without a doubt, what nighttime Fuyuki was.

A single heroic horse sprinted cross that bizarre landscape as though it ruled over the place. Waver was being carried on its vigorous back, hurrying towards his place of death. Directly behind him was the massive and magnificent chest of the King of Conquerors, so close that even its pounding heartbeats were transmitted.

Even if he were to survive this night, Waver would never forget this tense, silent exaltation. There was a time known in the world as the 'moment of truth'. When the soul, bared and released from all deception and embellishment, took in the sweeping view of the world in its true state, there existed an instant that knew nothing but the shaking of the heart. Surely, that was what he was reflecting upon right now. The instant when any and all of the world's mysteries and paradoxes were comprehended and yet remained unanswered. The instant the meaning of existence and the value of death could be clearly grasped even without words. It was a time of supreme bliss, of release from all of the bewilderment and uncertainty, the hardships of human life.

The warhorse leisurely slipped out of the sleeping city and jumped toward the riverbank, filled with still water in the color of darkness. In the still night, the great bridge they were aiming for was lit in white by the brilliance of hollow mercury lamps.

"Rider, that's....."

The King of Conquerors responded to the pointing Waver with a nod.

Standing on the bridge illuminated as if by broad daylight, his brilliantly golden, majestic appearance radiated all the more, as though sneering at such counterfeits as artificial light. The remorseless cold-heartedness of his eyes' deep crimson glint froze Waver's entire body with fear even when they were hundreds of meters apart.

Servant Archer, King of Heroes Gilgamesh -

It wasn't that he hadn't prepared himself. From the beginning, he had understood that this was an unavoidable opponent. Even so, now that he was once again facing the real thing, the air of intimidation overcame all of the heart's defenses and came to crush the core of his soul.

"You scared, boy?"

Rider, who felt Waver's shaking, asked quietly. The boy frankly nodded without any pretense of bravery.

"Yeah, I'm scared. Or I guess, to put it your way, 'my heart is jumping with excitement'."

At his tense response, the King of Conquerors' face broke into a pleased smile.

"That's exactly it. When the enemy is mighty, the yearning for the sweet wine of victory becomes utter bliss. Oh ho, looks like you understand it now."

Bucephalus strode majestically, carrying the bravely boasting Rider to the foot of the bridge.

This would be their fourth and doubtless final chance meeting. The primordial King of Heroes and the legendary King of Conquerors. To the two of them, both occupying the wide four-lane road as though they owned it, the only obstacle that could hinder them was each other. The bridge was a one-way road; if one wouldn't back down, then the other wouldn't try to avoid. For a competition of tyranny between these two kingly beings, it was an inevitable, even fated battlefield.

Bucephalus stopped his hooves, having halted after evidently sensing the will of his rider, who rewarded him by scratching his mane.

"Boy, wait here for now."

" - Huh?"

Rider lowered himself from the back of his beloved horse, stood on the ground, and began walking with an air of composure towards the waiting enemy. As though it

had been prearranged, Archer also began walking to meet him halfway, his heels ringing out haughtily.

They were not warriors who simply competed with their martial skills alone. Seeing as they would both compete in tyranny in addition to crossing swords, they must also proceed through the proper channels.

"Rider, where is your vaunted chariot?"

As soon as he opened his mouth, Archer questioned him with restless anger.

"Ah, that. Well. Aggravatingly, that Saber has carried it off."

Rider replied with a carefree shrug. Archer stared at him, scrutinizing with his blood-colored eyes.

"...Did you forget what I had decided? You were informed that you would be defeated at your most perfect condition."

"Hm, now that you mention it, that's right."

With no fear for the intimidation, Rider, in an exceedingly bold and ferocious way, bent his lips and smiled.

"True, my weapon has been consumed. But do not take that lightly, King of Heroes. Tonight, Alexander is incomplete, and therefore *beyond complete*."

It was an incoherent manner of speaking, but Archer did not sneer at his nonsense, and looked over Rider's entire body with sharp eyes that seemed to cut into him.

" - I see. Yes, your Aura is overflowing. It is unusually stalwart. It seems you do not stand before me without some prospects of victory."

It was the truth. While he had lost one of his Noble Phantasms, the amount of prana seething from Rider right now was several times higher than before. The three expended Command Seals that Waver had intended to 'waste away meaninglessly' were unwittingly exercising an effect. When using Command Seals to activate ultimate authority, the more vague the contents, the more reduced the effects will be. On that point, as Waver's earlier orders all lacked concreteness, in terms of using the Command Seals, they were in effect wasted. On the other hand, a Command Seal activated not as an absolute command bending the will of the Servant, but with the consent of both parties, would not only enforce the Servant's actions, but also become a way to support and amplify them. In this case, similar to how Kiritsugu's Saber achieved **Spatial Relocation**, the Command Seals could at times make

possible unprecedented things that overturned the normal methods of magecraft, things on the same level as 'Magic'.

While the method of usage made little impression, since the three Seals conformed to the Servant's own will and furthermore were activated in succession, Rider received a definite effect from Waver's Command Seals. As long as he aspired toward the action of 'victory', Rider would receive an amplified amount of Prana support compared to normal. Frankly, the current Rider was, even more so than in the past, at his 'most perfect'.

"Hey, Archer. Speaking of decisions, wasn't there one more agreement from our banquet before?"

"The conclusion that we would have no choice but to kill one another?"

"Didn't we say we would drink up the rest of the wine before that?"

Rider, with an honest smile unthinkable for one preparing for mortal combat, urged the King of Heroes.

"At that time, some boorish fellows tried to spoil our banquet... but there was still something left in the bottle. You can't fool my eyes."

"As expected of the king of usurpation. You are sharp-sighted when it comes to the belongings of others."

Archer, with a bitter smile, once again called forth a set of drinking vessels from the alternate-world 'vault' to his hand. The bottle was emptied, and the rest of the high-quality wine from the Age of the Gods at its bottom was poured completely into two cups. Like two boxers crossing their gloves, they solemnly knocked their cups together.

"One more thing, King of Babylonia. My last summation to you."

"Permitted. State it."

His goblet still raised, wearing a serious face while some rascally naivete remained in his gaze, Alexander began.

"For example, if my Ionion Hetairoi was equipped by your Gate of Babylon, it would undoubtedly become the most powerful army. Even that President of the West wouldn't be more than a break of wind."

"Hm. And?"

"Once again, will you not be my ally? If we join together, we can surely conquer as far as the ends of the stars."

Hearing this, the King of Heroes, as though he had heard some very satisfying satire, laughed out loud without a care.

"How deeply amusing you are. It has been a long time since I have laughed this much at something other than a jester's foolish nonsense."

Even as he laughed, his ruthless dreadfulness did not weaken in the slightest. Perhaps killing intent and great delight held roughly the same meaning to this golden ruler.

"It is unfortunate, but I do not require a second friend. Past and future, my companion will only be one - and there need not be two kingly ones."

At such a resolute response, the King of Conquerors simply nodded quietly without showing his dejection.

"That is a high and lonely kingship. I shall challenge that unshakable state of affairs with great admiration."

"Good. Display yourself to your heart's desire, King of Conquerors. You are a foe worthy of my judgment."

The two Kings gulped down their last drink together, disposed of the emptied cups, and turned back on their heels. Without turning around again, the two each returned to the bridgehead they came from.

Waver, who had watched over their last toast with a tense expression, went to meet the King's return with a sigh.

"Do you two actually get along?"

"Well, we'll be killing each other now. Or he could be the last opponent in my entire life that I will exchange glances with. I can't be ungrateful."

"... Don't be stupid."

Waver countered Alexander's joking tone with a stifled voice.

"There's no way you can be killed. I won't accept that. Did you forget my Command Seals?"

"That's right - yeah, that's it."

With an intrepid smile, Rider once again straddled the back of the waiting Bucephalus and unsheathed the sword affixed to his hip.

"Gather, my brethren! Tonight, we shall mark our gallant figures into the strongest legend!"

A wind of hot sand blew onto the bridge as though responding to the King's call and scattered the mist from the river.

The thoughts of the Heroic Spirits who had once seen the same dream as the King, drawn from beyond time and space, now came together and wove around the sword of the Cypriots.

A boundless blue sky. A horizon, blurred by the heat haze, that all would gaze at with a single heart in order to ascertain its very end.

The mental images of the brave ones who crossed time to seek the battlefield eroded even reality and turned the uninhabited great bridge into a great plain with a raging whirlwind.

And one by one, the Heroic Spirits hastened to the stage of the decisive battle they were ordered to.

"Ahh....."

This was the second time Waver had seen the spectacle of the arrayed Ionion Hetairoi in their magnificence. Even though it was no longer something to be shocked by, now that he knew the meaning of this ultimate Noble Phantasm which actualized the kingship of Alexander, he was overwhelmed by a sense of awe even greater than the first time.

The shining elites of the cavalry - the bond of lord and servant they had formed with the King of Conquerors once upon a time could overcome even the separation of life and the afterlife.

There was no place where their battlefield, sublimed into eternity, could not be actualized. If the King of Conquerors would again set forth in tyranny, then no matter where he was, his servants would hasten to him.

That was the pride of being together with the King.

The joy of being able to battle together, of their hot surging blood.

"Our enemy is the King of Heroes, mightier than tens of thousands - an opponent lacking in no regard! Come, heroic warriors, show the original Heroic Spirit the way of our tyranny!"

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhh - !!!"

At Alexander's roar, the cheers of the arrayed troops rose into the air.

Only the solitary Archer was before them, confronting the great host which boiled like the high seas, but he did not show a speck of dismay and simply stood, imposingly blocking their path. His appearance, painted in gold, was like a single arduous towering peak. The air of intimidation was unmistakably unprecedented, precisely what would come from a demigod Heroic Spirit.

"Come, lord of the vanquishers. Now you shall know the true form of a King....."

At the boldly boasting King of Heroes, the host of Heroic Spirits, led by the heroic horse Bucephalus, finally charged in a wedge formation.

Rider bellowed as he spearheaded the vanguard. Answering his roar, the knights released a battle cry. To the surging waves and harsh thundering songs, Waver added his own small voice with all his might.

"AAAALaLaLaLaie!!"

-03:59:48

At that moment, Saber was wandering aimlessly around eastern Shinto in search of Irisviel. Naturally, she too noticed the smoke signal sent out at Fuyuki Municipal Hall.

Though she did not understand the significance of the signal, it undoubtedly had something to do with the Heaven's Feel. Like one critically ill who would turn to any doctor, as if grasping a lifeline, Saber immediately turned the vehicle and sped in the direction of the smoke signal's flare.

Saber, who did not need to cross the Mion River to reach her destination, was not attacked by Archer who was guarding the bridge, and arrived first at the Fuyuki Municipal Hall.

Saber drove the V-MAX through the silent night scene; revving the V-type four-cylinder engine, she drove into the front porch, the walls of which still looked new.

There was no sign of the enemy in sight, and neither could she sense any killing intent hidden in the darkness. In that case — was the enemy hiding within the building?

Saber gazed for a moment at the pitch-black area near the outer wall of the Municipal Hall, turning the V-MAX around to the guiding road designated for visitors. She followed the sloping path that extended below the building and entered the underground parking area.

In the underground area where the moonlight could not reach, the white light of the headlights cut through the darkness to shine on the icy cement wall. The wide car park, designed to accommodate more than a hundred cars, had not yet been opened for use; only several cars from the construction company were parked here and there; the rest of the empty space was heavy with dusty air.

The rough roar of the V-MAX's engine was also swallowed up in an instant by the strange, crypt-like silence. Saber warily glanced at her surroundings. All around her was dense darkness, the shadows of the support pillars that had been built all over the place… Extremely suitable for the enemy to hide his form. More importantly, her instinct felt the murderous intent that almost saturated the air.

"Ah…"

From the floor came a resentful sigh; it sounded like the groaning of the dead from a dark abyss.

Saber could not have heard this sound wrongly, for she had many times been its target—

“URRRRRR!!”

She immediately reacted to the explosion that closely followed the roar.

Saber twisted and retreated quickly. In the spot she had just been, the V-MAX left behind was surrounded by fire that splashed like rain. In just one instant, her beloved steel steed was turned into a shapeless heap of scrap. The gunpowder scent of burning reached Saber’s nose.

“This weapon is—“

Saber had an impression of it. This was the rain of fire that had turned Lancer’s Master and the rest—all who had fallen terribly victim to Emiya Kiritsugu’s calculations—into pitiful corpses. It was the mechanized shooting weapon that had become mainstream in this modern world.

In the depths of the darkness, red lotuses of flame blossomed once more. Under the firelight that shone from the muzzle of the gun, the black shadow of Berserker lengthened to a state of deformity as it gestured threateningly on the walls of the underground parking area. Without the slightest hesitation, Saber leaped into the air, dashing out through a baptism of flying lead bullets. The stray bullets of unimaginably destructive power tore open a large hole in the cement of the ground and walls. That power obviously could not be spoken of in tandem with the weapon that Maiya had used. Saber sensed that even though she was a Servant, if she were hit she would be fatally wounded; she gnashed her teeth in anger.

Of course, she could not have known the process by which Berserker had obtained the small machine guns. Both of the crazed black knight’s hands held a modern firearm that Kotomine Kirei had prepared using the power of his position as Supervisor; Berserker nimbly and freely operated them as if they were extensions of his own hands. The firearms’ structure and holster were all immersed in the hated prana, and had turned into fierce magecraft military equipment that could threaten even Saber.

“[redacted]!”

The two machine guns were not in any way inferior to the black knight’s angry howl; screeching hotly, they attacked Saber. The bullets, faster than the speed of sound,

were still unable to surpass the speed of Saber's sword. Nevertheless, the speed of twenty-odd bullets per second left her only able to parry.

Berserker could confer the properties of a Noble Phantasm on the weapon in his hand, regardless of its origin or time period. Once it had been upgraded to the category of Noble Phantasm, the difference in power between the two weapon types of 'sword' and 'firearm' forced Saber into a decisively disadvantageous situation.

Because the building's construction was not yet finished, a large number of paint cans were piled in one corner of the parking lot. One of the stray bullets struck them, and the calcined bullet caused the solvent to explode. The underground darkness was dissipated by red lotuses of flame.

Saber was so restricted by the curtain of bullets that she could not close in; she looked around in search of a method by which she could return from certain defeat. Then, she saw a small truck parked in a lot at the corner of the car park.

"— That's it!"

Accepting the risk that she could be forced into the corner with no route of retreat, Saber dashed toward the vehicle she had set her eyes on. Berserker pursued her as she fled, at the same time shooting at random with the firearms in his hands. Saber made a ferocious step that narrowly preceded the howling bullets, dashing to the back of the truck. She brandished the flat of her blade upward, flinging the structure of the vehicle into the air.

At that point, the rain of bullets targeting Saber crumpled the truck as if it had been a paper model. Saber continued to hide behind the structure of the truck, pieces of which had been scattered all over, using her shoulder to halt the rotating chassis. In this manner, she dashed toward Berserker.

Berserker continued to shoot, using the machine gun to mercilessly smash the structure of the truck to iron chips. Even though the heavy frame of the truck quickly met its disintegrated fate, from Saber's perspective, as long as the 'temporary shield' could close the distance and bring Berserker into proximity of her sword's attack, it would be enough.

"Uaoaoaoao!"

The bullets, which had penetrated the structure of the truck, grazed her face and shoulders. One bullet sent sparks flying in all directions as it impacted the oil tank, combusting the fuel inside. The structure of the vehicle, already unrecognizable, was

consigned to the flames. Nevertheless, even this did not stop the pace of Saber's attack.

When the distance to the adversary had closed to less than ten meters, Saber picked an opportune moment to throw the wreckage of the truck toward Berserker. Facing the flaming iron scrap, Berserker not only declined to dodge, but also brought up a single hand in the attempt to smash it with one fist.

— The time was ripe.

"Ha-a!!"

With a great shout, Saber once again pressed in on the burning structure of the truck with the thunderous speed of lightning, using all her strength to drive her attack downward. The precious sword pierced the burning piece of iron that had been used as a distraction; the point of the sword closed in on Berserker on the other side.

Blocked by the obstacle, Berserker was completely unable to see Saber's actions, and thus had no way of avoiding this attack. In the third clash of blades, Saber finally scored a hit on the enemy in one blow. From the point of her sword, a sense of having scored a direct hit traveled up to her hand.

But—

"— Too shallow!?"

On Saber's side, because of the blocking shield, she too could not directly see her target. Even though she had indeed scored a hit on the other by relying on her intuition to attack, she had ultimately not been lucky enough to score a critical hit in that blow. The front part of Invisible Air, though it had accurately made contact with the center of the forehead of the black helmet, it had been unable to smash the skull inside.

The outside of the truck was subject to a heavy rain of bullets, and its inside had been pierced by a sword; this time it finally broke into two pieces. Although Berserker had not received a fatal wound, the fierce attack to his face made him stagger backward and left him unable to recover for a short moment. That was time enough for a follow-up attack. Now the scales of victory were tipped toward Saber.

Saber kicked aside the burning vehicle wreckage and lifted her sword high into an upward stance. This time, she would definitely not let him off. She aimed at the

top of Berserker's defenseless head and gambled victory on the following direct attack.

The stance, speed, and timing were all perfect. It was a strike worthy of the name of the sword-wielding Heroic Spirit, enough to make one believe that the outcome had been decided—precisely for this reason, the instant when Saber's sword was stopped in midair was especially surprising.

Berserker threw away the machine guns, trapping the blade of Invisible Air between his bare hands before her eyes. That consummate skill was unbelievable on two counts: the first was that he had used an impossible stance to respond to Saber's follow-up killing blow, and the second was that he had done so even though it was impossible to perceive the path of Invisible Air. But the Black Knight had grabbed the white blade with his bare hands to seal Saber's attack as if he had known every detail of Saber's sword, from the shape to the length, like the back of his hand.

Saber suddenly realized the fatal danger of having Berserker come into contact with her weapon; she shuddered violently. She banished the astonishment of her heart to the back of her mind and used all her strength to kick out towards the black knight's chest. Berserker, who could not take the blow and was forced to retreat, released the precious sword, allowing Saber's beloved weapon to narrowly escape the danger of being corroded by the other's black magic.

The sprinklers on the ceiling at last reacted to the flames spreading all around; they began to violently spray curtains of water. Even though their bodies were exposed to torrential pour of water, the silver and black knights still did not move in the slightest as they confronted each other.

In Saber's heart again rushed forth a question that could not be overlooked.

The deceptive illusion of Invisible Air had been ineffective against Berserker. He was obviously very familiar with the sword protected by an invisible sheath. In other words, that meant that he had originally known her before she had become a Heroic Spirit.

At the warehouse district and Mion River, this black knight had shown an abnormal persistence in attacking Saber. If his actions had not been under his Master's instructions, but this insane Heroic Spirit's own hatred…

The more she stared at the black fog, the more indistinct the details of the armor became. This indicated that around Berserker's body was twined a delusive

protection similar to Invisible Air, making it impossible to see the true face of this Heroic Spirit. But at this point Saber could not but believe — he was undoubtedly one of the knights who had known her.

"… Your skill says that you are by no means an anonymous knight. Answer me!"

Saber made up her mind and cried out loudly to the enemy she confronted through the mist.

"Since you have recognized that I am the King of Britain Arturia Pendragon and challenged me as such, you should make known your background with the glory befitting a knight! To issue a challenge while hiding your identity is akin to plotting against me!"

The patter of water, like a heavy downpour of rain, was slowly penetrated by a clear clatter — *ka-da-ka-da* — of metal. Though it was very slight, the sound that permeated the ears chilled her soul; undoubtedly, it came from Berserker — under the cover of the black mist, his full-body armor was trembling.

That was the gentle sound of the armor that completely covered his limbs as the pieces rippled softly and knocked against each other.

"You…"

Saber finally discovered the source of the strange sound, like a sigh or a groan, crawling across the ground.

That grinding, sobbing noise originated from the depths of the black helmet. Berserker's entire body shuddered, revealing an emotion that could not be suppressed.

Laughter — when Saber understood it thus, an unspeakable shudder ran through her body.

Lacking sound logic or proof, with only her sixth sense as guidance, she realized one thing: her previous interrogation had been a fatal mistake.

It was a pity that she had realized it too late. The words that would have summoned to her the worst possible curse had long since been spoken through her own lips.

The black fog painting the black knight's entire body began to swirl and contract. Within the rushing mist, the pitch-black armor finally revealed its true colors.

It was perfect armor that was neither exquisite nor crude, but which perfectly melded magnificence and functionality.

The delicate, nuanced workmanship of a smith who had put in his utmost effort succeeded in granting it an air of formidability and fine construction. The countless marks and scratches etched into it became carvings highlighting the wearer's illustrious military exploits, adding a touch of valor to the armour. It was an ideal battle outfit that all knights could not help but envy.

Saber recognized the hero that had once worn that armor to ride forth on the battlefield. At the Round Table of Camelot he had been an unrivaled swordsman more radiant than any other; he had been a knight more excellent and a warrior more loyal, more brave than any other.

"You are— how could—"

She wished that she had seen wrongly. He was the ideal incarnation embodying the true face of a 'knight'. That illustrious appearance could not have become the pitch-black form corroded by the Mad Enhancement curse.

The black knight laughed sinisterly as if mocking Saber's thoughts, reaching for the hilt of the precious sword in its scabbard. That sword had neither been picked up nor stolen. This Heroic Spirit who had been hiding his name all along was finally revealing his own Noble Phantasm.

Saber could only watch on helplessly as he slowly drew the precious sword from its scabbard.

She could not have been wrong; the design of the sword was the same as that of her own, and the fairy letters carved into it was proof that it had not been forged by mortal hands. The flash of the sharp blade under the moonlight was like the water of the lake as it shone with radiance. That was a limitless sword that would not be damaged regardless of the attack it had received.

Only he who was exalted as 'the perfect knight' was worthy of having that sword; its name was also known as 'Arondight • The Indestructible Light of the Lake' — that evidence spoke the bearer's name even more clearly than if he had said it himself.

"… Ar… thur…"

The vengeful cry reverberated within the black helmet. With this one vibration, the mask that had already cracked under Saber's previous blow now shattered.

From the fractured mask was revealed a blackened face.

Nothing remained of the beautiful visage that had once drawn the admiration of many women. Yesterday's hatred had made him as gaunt and pallid as a phantom; only his eyes, filled with hatred, gave out light. That was the visage of a living dead man who had lost everything to a curse.

"… Ah…"

Saber felt her knees weaken. The unyielding King of Knights forgot herself in helplessness; as if unable to bear the weight of water droplets raining upon her shoulders and back, she fell to her knees on the wet floor.

— Even those who are heroes will fall so far as to lose even the most basic sense of honor —

In the past, someone had spoken to her thus.

In that case, had the curse started from then?

"… Do you really…"

Saber looked at the figure before her eyes, who had long since lost the distinguished dignity of yesterday and had been thoroughly changed by his descent into the seat of madness; hot tears rushed forth, and she could only question.

"… Do you really hate me so much, my friend…? Even if you have become as such… Do you hate me so much, Knight of the Lake?!"

In that instant, the young girl who always maintained her glory to the very end, who fought for honor to the very last—

That was the instant in which she was defeated.

-03:59:32

In the silence, a repulsive odor of burning assailed his nostrils; it seemed that a fire had broken out somewhere in this large edifice.

Unhurried, Emiya Kiritsugu's steps were light and decisive as he slowly walked to the center of the empty porch.

He moderately relaxed the muscles of his entire body, not using excessive strength to any area. On the other hand, his nerves reflected the entire situation of the surrounding area, like a mirror more quiet and clear than the surface of a lake sealed in ice, more sensitive than hearing, more distinct than vision, with no blind spots. He had transformed himself into a probe that could instantly sense any slight movement as he strolled through the darkness.

Kotomine Kirei should be somewhere here in the Fuyuki Municipal Hall, awaiting Emiya Kiritsugu's arrival.

Considering this outcome, the ambush that Kiritsugu had planned had truly been an utter failure. But he felt no regret whatsoever, as he had finally been able to ascertain the true colors of Kotomine Kirei, the enigmatic adversary; this was still considered a large gain. Precisely because Kiritsugu's many predictions had come to nothing, he had gotten the answer through the process of elimination.

To sum it up, that man had no interest whatsoever in the Grail.

Under ordinary circumstances, all the Masters would battle for the sake of pursuing the Grail. This idea had taken root as a lasting first impression; it had blinded Kiritsugu's eyes all this time, until today. This was precisely why Kiritsugu had felt uncertainty and a lack of understanding toward Kotomine Kirei's actions — which had had nothing to do with the Grail.

But tonight, Kiritsugu had clearly seen Kirei's strategy for the ceremony for the Grail's descent and discovered that he had been fundamentally wrong.

In using the Fuyuki Municipal Hall as the sacrificial altar, Kirei's preparation had really not been thorough. This fragile fortress was already lacking as a magecraft stronghold, but he did not take any defensive measures. Even if time had been pressing, he should at least have set up basic traps and protective screens. Furthermore, if there had truly been no time to prepare, then why would he have done something like summoning the other Servants to come forth for a decisive battle? Even taking a hundred steps back, even if he really did know absolutely

nothing about defensive magecraft, then why would he choose the one leyline out of the four that was most unsuitable for a defensive battle?

On thinking this, Kiritsugu could only believe — to Kotomine Kirei, the descent of the Grail was of secondary importance. That man had picked the Fuyuki Municipal Hall solely because the chances of being ambushed there were lowest. In comparison to a successful descent of the Grail, he hoped more to gain the most advantageous initiative in the final decisive battle between Masters.

Kotomine Kirei's goal was not the Grail, but the bloodshed involved in the process of obtaining it. The reason for that could not be investigated, nor did it need investigation. It was enough to have understood who exactly the Executor's target was.

Kiritsugu slowly gripped the Thompson Contender; feeling the touch of walnut wood under his fingers, he thought of the face he had only ever seen in a photograph.

At this point, even if he tried to pinpoint how and where his path had crossed with that of Kotomine Kirei, it was only a hollow attempt. Kiritsugu's life had not sailed so smoothly as for him to assert that he had never made an enemy of someone. That he was an outsider who had gatecrashed the Heaven's Feel solely due to a personal feud with Kiritsugu — this possibility could only be eliminated due to reasons of probability. Though there was only a very small chance that an outsider could have lasted to the very end of the Heaven's Feel, as well as directed a farce that had changed the direction in which the Grail had progressed—the reality was before his eyes, and Kiritsugu could only accept it as the truth.

Emiya Kiritsugu had never sought the truth nor answer to things. To him, only the 'situation' had ever been worthy of concern.

He had merely vowed in his heart that he would save more people. There was no distinction between the lives that were saved. The balance that measured sacrifice and salvation had nothing to do with reason or circumstance. Thus was his existence. He would certainly not be foolish enough to inquire as to the significance of his actions.

Therefore — in Kiritsugu's heart, none whatsoever remained of the fear and sense of crisis that he had previously felt towards Kotomine Kirei.

From the starting point of knowing what his motives were, that man had fallen to become a simple obstacle that hindered Kiritsugu's progress. No matter how strong

an enemy the other was, as long as Kiritsugu was sure that it was someone he must challenge, that person was no longer one for which he would feel anything. There was no fear, no hatred, neither underestimation nor compassion; he considered only one thing: elimination. That was the only function that Kiritsugu gave himself as a killing machine.

The large auditorium that comprised the first to third floor could be said to be the key area of Fuyuki Municipal Hall. Kirei placed the corpse of the dead homunculus on the stage - which, having been completely renovated, was waiting only for the first performance.

In its soft abdominal cavity, a foreign object could definitely be felt. It was likely that the Grail that had been mixed in with the organs was now regaining its original form. Though Kirei could now cut open the abdominal cavity and remove it, he was not anxious to do so. When one more Servant's soul was reclaimed, the outer covering should automatically collapse and reveal the Grail. He had only to wait.

Archer was confronting Rider at the bridge; Berserker was blocking Saber at the underground parking garage. Everything was running smoothly. Now there was no one to disturb Kirei.

He left the auditorium and arrived at the corridor. Instantly, the black smoke that suffused the air assailed his nostrils. The origin of the fire should be the underground battlefield. From the density of the smell, the fire had already spread to the different areas of the structure. But all the wire connections to the outside, including the fire alarm, had already been cut off; as long as the fire did not spread outside the structure, it would not be discovered by the nearby residents.

With every step he took, his mood became more passionate; the holy words of benediction could not help but spill from his lips.

"He restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me—"

He was here. Now he was sure to meet with him.

Emiya Kiritsugu was nearby. Just as Kirei desired his arrival, so did he search for Kirei.

The flames had dispersed the darkness, flickering and dancing in various areas of the corridor. Warm air caressed Kirei's face, but he did not care. The tide of blood that roiled in his heart burned even hotter than the flames.

Now, Kirei felt blessed for the first time. The God who had never blessed him before in his life had finally given him a revelation.

What he pursued was this catharsis of hatred, this joy of the fight.

"— Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life—"

The tongues of flame followed the walls up to the ceiling, turning into signposts showing the way to Hell in invitation to the two men.

They advanced silently, high-spiritedly, without hesitation, toward the place of the decisive battle.

Thus, they met one level below ground - the storage space for large props directly beneath the stage.

At the other end which roiled with black smoke, Emiya Kiritsugu saw the slender figure clothed in vestments.

At the other end which roiled with hot air, Kotomine Kirei saw the black overcoat of his mortal enemy.

The radiance of the Black Keys in his hand reflected the brightness of the barrel of the magecraft gun.

They both perceived the killing intent; they had long come to realize that blazing sensation.

So there was no further need for words for communication.

They finally looked directly upon each other with their own eyes; they came to the same conclusion at the same time.

Seven Masters. Seven Servants. All that was merely what could be called the 'situation'.

衛宮切嗣にとって、この戦いは――
言峰綺礼にとって、この冬木の戦場は――
すべて、いま目の前に立ちはだかるあの敵を討つためだけにあったのだ。

――今ここに、最後の対決は音もなく幕を切って落とした。

To Emiya Kiritsugu, this war was—

To Kotomine Kirei, the entire battlefield of Fuyuki was—

Everything of everything existed for the sake of bringing down the enemy before them.

Within the raging flames, the blades were moving.

Three in his left, three in his right, the Executor pulled out a total of six Black Keys and sprinted forth.

The sight of the assassin’s gun trained on the shadow that closed in with the wind.

At this moment and in this place, the curtains opened soundlessly upon the final showdown.

-03:59:04

The earth rumbled and clouds of sand were blown up as Ionian Hetairoi approached -

Even before such an overwhelming spectacle, the King of Heroes, Gilgamesh did not move in the slightest.

The only thing dwelling in those red eyes gazing at the magnificence was complete blood-colored joy. It was a feeling beyond the bounds of mundanity, known only to the king who had completely exhausted all the pleasures of this world.

In truth, Archer was pleased.

He was tired of how he would be invited till the end of time, repeatedly, to farces that were battles in name only. And now, he had finally obtained an opponent he could recognize as an 'enemy'.

A challenge from that Rider was worth using his full strength to gain supremacy.

"Lashing dreams together and aspiring for tyranny... I will praise your enthusiasm. But brave soldiers, have any of you discerned it? The truth, that a dream is something you ought to wake up from before long."

Archer, with the key sword in hand, unlocked the vault from thin air. However, he did not deploy Gate of Babylon. What he took out was only a single sword.

"And thus, it was inevitable that I would be the one to block your path, King of Conquerors."

- Could it really be called something as specialized as a 'sword'?

It was a weapon of far too abnormal a shape. There was a grip and a hand guard, and its length was about that of a longsword. But the crucial section where the 'blade' should have been assigned deviated far too much from the form of an edged weapon. It was a dull blade with a pillar made of three sections lined up, and a tip which spun in a spiral shape. The three pillar sections were like querns, slowly continuing to rotate in alternation.

Yes, it was no longer a sword. Something born before the appearance of the concept that this world called a "sword" can't possibly have the shape of a known sword. It was something constructed by a God before humans. It was the actualization of the works of a God recorded at the beginning of the world.

The three quern-like cylinders, acting in concert with the movement of the Heavens, revolved as each creaked with a weight and power equivalent to tectonic movement. The enormous amount of seething and overflowing prana was beyond measurement.

"Now, know the conclusion of your unfulfilled dream. The truth shall be shown by my own hand."

Archer held his hand high above his head, and the sword of the beginning gradually increased the speed of its revolutions. Faster with each rotation, ever faster...

Rider, who perceived the threat simply through instinct, pressed on Bucephalus' reins.

"It's coming!"

He yielded the first move to Archer. That was fine. Even though he yielded it, it was just one blow. Ionian Hetairoi would trample that lonely golden shadow without waiting for the next.

That being the case, he had to devote himself to overcoming that one blow. Archer boasted incomparable Noble Phantasms; this was unmistakably a trump card only for when, in his own way, he believed the time was ripe.

Was it an anti-army Noble Phantasm?

An anti-fortress Noble Phantasm?

Or it could be an anti-personnel Noble Phantasm, and what he truly intended was to shoot only at Rider, at the head of the army, bringing him down with certainty...

It rumbled as a tornado roared, and an enormous amount of prana surged forth from the grip of Archer's sword.

"Now awake, **Ea**. A stage befitting you has been prepared!"

Ea - the God of earth and water from ancient Mesopotamian mythology who had separated **Heaven** and **Earth**.

Called by this name, the **Sword of Rupture** was the primordial sword present at the creation of the world in the Age of Gods. The role the blade of the beginning accomplished - it was nothing short of that which had cut apart what had been shapeless into Heaven and Earth, what had given a definitive shape to that distinction.

And now, the rotating God sword, haughtily blowing up storm winds, would once again perform that miracle of genesis. The golden King of Heroes triumphantly shouted a declaration.

"Come now and look up - to Enuma Elish!"

Heaven screamed, and Earth shook.

An enormous collection of prana was released, grinding at the laws of space.

The sword tip Archer swung down was not aimed at anyone in the first place.

It was no longer a matter of aiming at anyone. What the Sword of Rupture's blade cuts down cannot be contained to simply 'the enemy'.

Rider, driving his horse hard, saw before his eyes the fracturing of the earth, and the opening of an abyss.

"Hmn?!"

He had observed the danger that was slowly occurring at his feet, but the momentum of the charging Bucephalus could no longer be repressed.

"Hii - "

The fate of falling could no longer be avoided; Waver stifled his scream. But of course, the horse and rider carrying him right now were not the kind to be daunted by a danger of this level.

"Haa - !"

Responding to Rider's reins, the heroic horse flew high into the sky with a kick of its splendid hind legs.

It was a bloodcurdling leap and glide. But sure enough, at the end of that single instant which seemed endless to Waver, what Bucephalus landed on was firm ground on the opposite side of the fissure.

However, before he had time to feel relieved, Waver paled at the horrific state of the following cavalry.

The brigade of King's Guards, not having legs as strong as Bucephalus', could not completely cross the rupture in the earth, and fell helplessly into the abyss like an avalanche. The warhorses of the ranks further back braked at the very brink and were saved from the miserable fate of the fall; however, it was yet nothing more than the beginning of the tragedy.

"Boy, hold on!"

Reprimanding him, Rider grabbed onto Waver while clinging to Bucephalus' mane.

In the time it took the heroic horse to sense the danger and jump back to a safe zone, the fissure expanded further in width, swallowing the surrounding earth and the knights.

No - it wasn't only the earth. The cracks stretched out from the surface to empty air, distorting space and sucking in the atmosphere. The entirety of their surroundings were blown into the end of the void by a surging wind.

"T-This is..."

It was such a scene that even the King of Conquerors was at a loss for words.

The Sword of Rupture commanded by the King of Heroes - what its single strike bore through was not only the earth, but *the world itself*, stretching to the sky. The attack was not even something to be discussed as a matter of whether it hit, or whether its force was advisable. Soldiers, horses, the dust, the sky - nearly everything that used the cut space as a foundation was swallowed and disappeared into the surging void.

Bucephalus planted his hooves firm with all his strength and resisted the atmospheric pressure of the vacuum; even as this happened, the great plain of hot sand woven by Ionian Hetairoi cracked, shattered, and collapsed into the abyss of the void like the ending of an hourglass.

Before that one blade was swung, all things were nothing more than chaos which could not form any meaning -

After that one blade was swung, a new truth divided and distinguished Heaven, Sea, and Earth.

The released tumult of genesis was no longer in the realm of an anti-fortress Noble Phantasm. It was an irregularity that broke down not only that which possessed shape, but all of creation. That was the true form of the **anti-world Noble Phantasm** that made the King of Heroes transcendent.

Heaven fell, Earth broke; within the darkness where everything returned to nothingness, only Archer's Sword of Rupture shone with brilliance. The dazzling light continued to complete the destruction, like a star of creation, the first thing illuminating the new world.

Rider and Waver could not ascertain all of this to the end. To begin with, the Reality Marble they were in was maintained by the total prana of the summoned Heroic Spirits. Before the world itself disappeared, the bounded field broke apart at the seams once over half of the army had been lost, and the distorted laws of space once again returned to the way they had been.

And so, as though awakening from a dream, Bucephalus, carrying the two of them, landed on the great bridge of nighttime Fuyuki.

On the opposite bridgehead the golden Archer stood, blocking their path with a bewitching smile. The location of the two did not change; it was as though time had rewinded back to the outset of the battle.

The only change that could be seen was the existence of the Sword of Rupture in Archer's hand, which was still twisting and growling even now.

And the fatal change that could not be seen - the disappearance of Ionian Hetairoi, Rider's trump card.

"Rider..."

The giant Servant, with a serious and dignified face, posed a question to his Master, looking up to him with a pallid expression.

"Come to think of it, there's one thing that I have to ask you."

"... Huh?"

"Waver Velvet. Would you be a servant, and serve me?"

His entire body shook with violent emotions. Then, like the bursting of a dam, floods of tears poured out.

It was a question that he knew would always be out of his reach, and yet one he had been yearning and anxiously waiting for. There was no need to search for a reply; it was because he had already prepared one, hidden deep in his heart like a treasure.

"You - "

The boy, called by his name for the first time, threw out his chest without wiping away his tears, and replied with a steady voice.

" - You, are my King. I will serve you. I will give my all for you. Please, guide me. Please let me see the same dream."

The King of tyranny smiled at the words of oath. To his servant, that smile was a reward surpassing any prize.

"Hm, very well."

As soon as his heart was enveloped by the uplifting joy - Waver's body was truly lifted into space.

"... Huh?"

The King picked up the boy's short body from the back of Bucephalus, and gently lowered him onto the surface of the asphalt road. Having lost the elevation from atop the horse and returned to the vision of his original height, Waver felt nothing but bewilderment at once again savoring his shortness and smallness.

"It is my duty as the King to exemplify the dream. And it is your duty as the servant to ascertain the dream of the King, and pass it down to later generations."

Upon a saddle so very high that his shaking hand could no longer reach it, the King of Conquerors smiled firmly but brightly as he passed down his royal command.

"Live on, Waver. See everything through to the end, live long, and tell it; the nature of your King; the sprint of this Alexander."

Bucephalus neighed, beating his hooves as though in encouragement - but in the end, was it for the King who would now face his death, or the servant who was entrusted with a difficult charge?

Waver hung his head, and did not raise it. Alexander took that as consent. There was no need for words. From this day until the end of time, the servant would be guided by the figure of the King, and the servant would remain loyal to that memory. In the face of the oath, even separation was meaningless; under the command of Alexander, the bond formed between King and servant was eternal and beyond time.

"Now, Bucephalus, to conquest!"

And so, the King of Conquerors kicked the flanks of his beloved horse, and went off to face his last sprint. Aiming for the bitter enemy waiting for him, he let out a screaming war cry.

He was a strategist. He acknowledged fully the indisputable flow of battle. But 'that' was different from 'this'. The King of Conquerors Alexander could not think of any other prescription other than charging toward the golden Heroic Spirit.

There was no resignation. There was no despair. What was there was only the utter excitement bursting full from his heart.

Strong - he was too strong. The hero who tore apart the world itself was undoubtedly the strongest enemy in Heaven and Earth.

In that case, this man was the last enemy.

He was higher than the peak of the Hindu Kush, hotter than the hot sands of the Mackran - he was the last obstacle in this world. And so, how could the King of Conquerors not challenge it? If he can surpass this, what lay beyond was surely the ends of the world. The faraway dream he had always been seeing was waiting to be fulfilled right now, before his eyes.

"***To Philotimo***" - he challenged it because it was unreachable; he expressed his tyranny, exemplified it, for the sake of the servant who watched over his back.

The King of Heroes, towering over his path, calmly gazed at the challenger, and released the treasures of the vault. Twenty, forty, eighty - a swarm of Noble Phantasms deployed from thin air, shining like so many glittering stars. That light made the King of Conquerors reminiscent of the starry sky of the East far off in the distance that he would look up to.

"AAAALaLaLaLaie!!"

Bellowing with a delight that shook his heart, he rushed on together with his beloved horse.

With haughty growls, the rain of stars approached. Incessantly, mercilessly, the impacts trampled over their bodies. However, that pain was nothing more than a worthless trifle compared to the excitement of this sprint.

There were times when he had succumbed to that sort of faint-heartedness - and yet was not about to reach 'the furthest end'. How foolish. What a disgrace.

The 'end' he had been seeking was now towering over his path. Having crossed countless hills, forded countless rivers, he finally discovered the ending point.

Thus, he would surpass it.

He would step across that enemy.

One step, and one step further. The only thing he had to do was simply repeat that. If he continued to accumulate it, then even that figure far in the distance would most surely be reached by his blade.

The swarm of stars poured on boisterously. In his fury where even his consciousness was prone to recede, his posture inadvertently and carelessly began to decline.

Then he realized that, at some point, he had started running on his own feet. How far did his beloved horse Bucephalus reach? Where did he end? He wanted to mourn for his friend, who had boldly carried out his duty to the end, but that was why he could not stop now. This step he would now take forward was in itself the mourning for those who were scattered.

His golden rival, as though understanding this, said something with an expression of amazement. But he could not hear him. Not even the flashes of light grazing past his ears, with the sounds of violent winds, could reach his ears.

What he heard, was simply - the sound of the waves.

The sound of the waves breaking onto the remote empty shores - of the sea at the world's end.

Aah, that was it. With a bright feeling, he understood it.

How had he not recognized it during all this time? - This violent throbbing of his heart was the roaring of Oceanus.

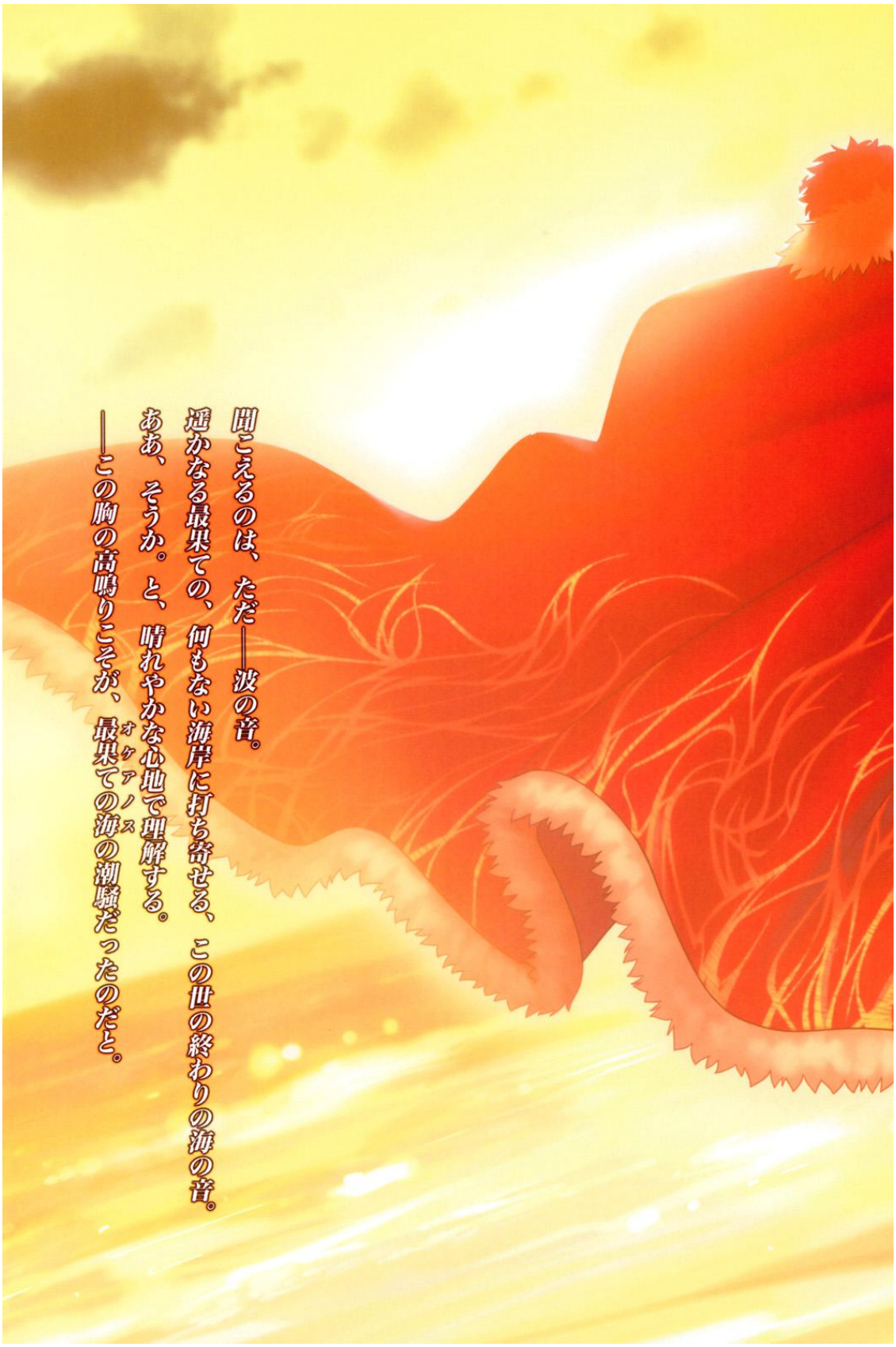
"Hahah... AHAHAHAHA!"

He saw his dream as he ran on the beach. The sensation of the sprays he kicked up felt pleasant on his toes. The bright red soaking his feet might be the blood flowing from his own abdomen, but what of it? Right now, he was watching a dream of the sea. How could there be any greater bliss?

The King of Heroes awaited him, right before his very eyes. One more step - and then, just one more, and his sword, brandished high, could cleave apart the crown of his head.

"Haaaah - !!"

With a ringing victory cry that reached the Heavens, he swung down the sword of the Cypriots.



聞こえるのは、ただ――波の音。
遥かなる最果ての、何もない海岸に打ち寄せる、この世の終わりの海の音。
ああ、そうか。と、晴れやかな心地で理解する。
――この胸の高鳴りこそが、最果ての海（オケアノス）の潮騒だったのだと。

It was the peak of a moment when he was convinced of his victory. The instant that should have passed in the blink of an eye seemed, for some reason, to stretch into an eternity. It was as though time stood still -

No. In truth, it did stop - not the flow of time, but his own body.

Just before the swung sword could reach, his blade, his limbs, his shoulders, and his abdomen were wrapped around by a tough chain; the King of Conquerors sighed.

Enkidu - the secret among secrets contained in the King of Heroes' vault. The restraint that captured even the Bull of Heaven.

" - Good grief... All these oddities, one after another..."

There was no wonder or regret. He simply derided himself for finally tripping over a small careless mistake. A bitter smile rose from his bloodstained lips.

The sword of the Cypriots could not reach him; however, Gilgamesh's Sword of Rupture pierced through Alexander's chest with its dull tip. He could feel the sensation of the slowly grinding blade inside his vitals. This sword just becomes more and more absurd - the King of Conquerors felt amazement as well as admiration, as though this was the affair of another.

" - Have you awoken from your dream, King of Conquerors?"

"... Hm, yes. I suppose..."

It could not be carried out this time, either. It had ended with the unfulfilled dream remaining as it was - unfulfilled. However, now that he thought about it, that was a one-time dream he had wagered his life for in the past.

The fantastic dream he saw in Asia Minor in the remote past - now, in this Far East land, he was once again seeing the same dream.

Thinking nostalgically on such checkered circumstances, Alexander smiled.

If he could see the same dream for even a second time, then it would not be strange to have a third.

Which would mean -

It was nearly the right time to see the next dream.

"This expedition has, been... exciting, in all respects as well..."

Alexander murmured in satisfaction, narrowing the corners of his eyes which were blurred by a blood haze. Ascertaining his expression of rapture, Gilgamesh solemnly nodded.

"You may challenge it however many times you wish, King of Conquerors."

To his worthy opponent, whose entire body was skewered from head to toe by the rain of Noble Phantasms, yet who did not stop until thwarted by the Chain of Heaven, the King of Heroes gave his greatest reward - he honored him with true feelings of admiration.

"Until the end of time, this world will always be my garden. Thus, I can assure you. You shall never find this world tiresome."

"Ooh...? That's, good to, hear..."

In the end, carelessly giving out the appropriate response, Servant Rider was quietly extinguished.

In terms of time, it was merely a short battle. It was nothing more than an offense and defense that barely filled the few seconds it took for the mounted Heroic Spirit to gallop across to the opposite bridgehead.

However, it was equivalent to a lifetime to Waver, who had it all burned into his eyes without blinking once.

He wouldn't ever forget it. Even if a lid was closed over his heart, he couldn't possibly forget. The scene his eyes caught in the last few seconds had already become a part of his soul and was impossible to detach.

Waver simply stood rooted to the ground, alone where he was left behind on the road, unable to move in the slightest. He repeatedly acknowledged that he must move, but he felt that if he tried to walk a single step he would collapse onto his knees.

However, he absolutely could not kneel down now.

The golden Archer, gazing at Waver with his brutal blood-colored eyes, slowly walked up to him. He must not avert his eyes. Even though his entire body was frozen with terror, he at least understood that. He would not survive if he averted his eyes now.

The boy shook with fear he did not attempt to hide, yet he stubbornly did not avert his eyes; Archer stood before him, and posed a question in a voice completely devoid of emotion.

"Boy, are you Rider's Master?"

He had thought that he couldn't possibly speak from a throat frozen by terror, but just as he was asked about his relationship with 'him', he was released from his stiffness for a short moment. Waver shook his head, and replied in a hoarse voice.

"No. I'm - his servant."

"Hmn?"

Archer narrowed his eyes, looked all over Waver in his entirety, and finally noticed that no place on his body conveyed the presence of the command seals.

" - I see. But boy, if you truly are a loyal subject, you have a duty to take revenge for your deceased King, do you not?"

Even with the second question, Waver answered with a strangely calm heart.

"... If I challenge you, I would die."

"Of course."

"I can't do that. I was ordered to *live*."

Yes - he couldn't die. Not now, when the last words entrusted to him by the King were engraved into his heart.

Waver must escape from this dilemma no matter what. He was before an enemy Servant and had no way to defend himself; even though it was a desperate situation where nothing could be done - the one thing he definitely could not do was give up. He could not ignore the way he had made the oath.

And that was perhaps a pain far more cruel than resigning himself to death.

The boy shook helplessly before the death he could not escape from, but his gaze alone made his adamance known. Looking down wordlessly on that too-small stature for a short while, Gilgamesh simply nodded once.

"The path of devotion is a great labor. Do not ever mar it."

He had no reason to raise his hand against a mongrel who was neither Master nor traitor. That was his decision as the King.

Waver watched his departure as the golden Heroic Spirit turned on his heels and calmly walked away. Before long, the figure was gone from his sight, and a cold wind blowing across the river completely scattered the air of battle that had been stretched out the entire time; afterward, the lone boy realized that he had been left behind in the night, and finally understood that everything had ended.

His knees shook again at the miracle that was his survival.

Right before Archer changed his mind, he had truly had the intent to kill Waver. The killing intent he released as naturally as breathing had wordlessly announced that. Had Waver averted his eyes, or collapsed with fear, or choked in his reply, that would have truly happened.

If one was to sneer at how he had only begged for his life, then one simply did not know of the remorselessness of the King of Heroes. Simply being alive after resisting his terror was a conflict, and a victory. It was the first time Waver Velvet had gained a victory in a challenge by himself.

It was an unsightly and very small battle. It was far from brave, or spectacular. No one yielded to him, and he obtained no plunder. The only thing he did was survive and escape from a dilemma.

Even so, Waver was happy. He was proud. Only Waver himself could understand how priceless it was for him to arrive at that impossible conclusion under those circumstances. That honor was in him only. Even if it appeared unsightly to an onlooker, there was no reason to feel ashamed.

He complied with the order of the King. He saw everything through to the end, and lived on.

He wanted to be praised. By that massive, heavy palm. By his rough, unreserved, and thick voice. This time, he wouldn't need to hide his embarrassment. He could have thrown out his chest unreservedly and boasted about his accomplishments to the man.

Yet - in this night sunken in silence, Waver was helplessly alone. No one was beside him. Like the him from eleven days ago, Waver was alone, left behind in a heartless and apathetic corner of the world.

The battle was only for him. No one had noticed what he had surpassed by himself in his loneliness. No one was praising him.

But if one were to call it a cruel treatment - then no, it wasn't.

He had been rewarded with more than enough words of praise just now. The grandest King in the world had recognized and assigned him. He was told that he would be added into the ranks of the servants.

The order of events was simply reversed.

He had now been praised for the far future as well; the only thing to do now was to devote all that remained of his life to accumulate enough accomplishments to match that eulogy.

Yes. Simply because of those words at that point in time - he was not alone.

The moment he understood this, his days as a boy was over.

And then he knew it for the first time; sometimes, tears flowed free from humiliation or regret.

Now, on the empty bridge, looking down on the black surface of the flowing river, Waver Velvet wet his cheeks without any regrets.

They were the warm and crisp tears of a man.

-03:55:51

– A woman was crying.

Her beautiful countenance became more ragged by the day with sorrow, and wrinkles of dilemma were etched into the ends of her brows; the woman was silently crying.

She blamed and questioned herself.

She was ashamed beyond measure.

As a sinner who shouldered all the guilt and blame in the world, she could only wet her face day after day with her tears.

Everyone was speaking wicked words of her – an unchaste wife, a traitorous queen.

Those foolish plebians blinded by the glorious myths did not know the truth, but only surrounded her and reprimanded her all at once.

They did not even know that her husband was not a man.

In this world, only her noble visage made ‘him’ give out his true heart.

However, all ‘he’ could recall were her frustrated and sorrowful tears.

Yes, ‘he’ had hurt her.

Loved her –

Was loved by her –

That was the root of their fall.

Even she must have had discarded everything back then and consigned herself.

An ideal king was needed to save the country ravaged by chaos and war – and a noble and virtuous queen needed to be beside the king. That was the way the monarch was supposed to be in the dreams of the populace.

A woman’s life was so insignificant compared to this grandiose ideal.

Even if the king wasn’t a man, even if this marriage was between two women who hid the true gender of one and could never be consummated, this sacrifice was necessary to protect the country and its greater good.

Even so, ‘he’ still wanted to save her.

The first time ‘he’ had been granted audience in the court, ‘he’ had sworn silently in his heart that ‘he’ would do anything for this woman, and would even give up ‘his’ life for her.

It had been too late when she discovered that it was this thought of ‘his’ that had been tormenting her.

She had fallen hopelessly in love with ‘him’.

She had already discarded the happiness of a woman. Love was the greatest taboo.

Even if this romance was impermissible, there should still have been a path in which they could make their difficult resolution, shoulder their sins, and continue till the end.

What man would not fight against the entire world for the woman he loved?

However – ‘he’ could not do that.

She was not a ‘woman’, nor was she a ‘human’, but a mechanical part called a ‘queen’ that supported the king ruling the world.

'He’ was not a ‘man’, nor was he a ‘human’, but a mechanical part called a ‘knight’ that served the king with absolute loyalty.

'He’ was the man called ‘the Knight of the Lake’ – incomparably brave, courteous and chivalrous, elegant and flamboyant at the same time. ‘He’ was indeed the personification of the essence of chivalry, an existence that all admired.

Not only was this ideal knight worshipped by all, he had even been blessed by the fairies. This title was ‘his’ ultimate glory, and at the same time the greatest curse bestowed upon ‘him’.

The ‘perfect knight’ who served the ‘perfect king’ – this man could only live in this way that others had expected and trusted ‘him’ to, and so give up ‘his’ life for it.

'His’ life did not belong to ‘himself’, but to the people who honored chivalry and gave their lives for it.

And the king that ‘he’ served was truly too perfect, a hero that was absolutely flawless. The ‘Knight of the Lake’ could never harbor any thoughts of betrayal towards this ‘King of Knights’ who had saved ‘his’ home country from the depths of war.

'He’ swore ‘his’ absolute loyalty to the perfect monarch, and made a noble friendship with the monarch.

'He’ also knew that, behind this noble chivalry, there was a tormented and ignored woman who wept by the day.

Just which path had been the correct one? No one could tell now.

Should ‘he’ have been cruel till the end and stayed with ‘his’ ideals, or should ‘he’ have discarded loyalty and lived for love?

While ‘his’ heart was twisting in agony, time was passing mercilessly by. Finally, the worst outcome greeted ‘him’.

Villainous fellows had shattered the king’s prestige to pieces, and the betrayal of the queen was finally revealed to the world. In order to save the queen, who had been given the death sentence, ‘he’ could only go against ‘his’ king in arms – thus, ‘he’ lost everything.

A knight turned traitor –

'His’ disloyalty broke the balance within the Knights of the Round Table. Finally, this incident became the trigger of war and carnage, and the country shattered to pieces in the flames of war.

Men had often called ‘him’ with those mocking tones.

That stained name was carved deeply in the history of the past and would never be washed clean.

Therefore, she fell into a deep self-deprecation for having misguided that ‘perfect knight’, and was crying to this day.

In the end, the only thing ‘he’ had done for the woman ‘he’ loved – was to make her cry forevermore.

Had ‘he’ been born as a sordid man without honor, ‘he’ may have taken away the queen without a moment’s hesitation and destroyed the king’s prestige.

But ‘he’ was a knight, an overly perfect knight.

For the king who was ‘his’ rival in love, for the one who caused the woman ‘he’ loved to step onto that painful and difficult road – 'he’ had never had any feelings of hatred till the end.

Yes, who could possibly depreciate that famous king? That king, whose glorious name was passed down through the eons, was more courageous and noble than anyone else. That king had ended that troubled time.

That king, who had never lost a battle, was uncorrupted and just, honorable but never affected by personal emotions, and had never made a mistake in life.

After all, that king had never blamed ‘him’ throughout life. Even when the king had gone to exchange blows with ‘he’ who had been discarded by the Round Table, it had been a helpless act to make an example out of ‘him’ with the country as their witness, and never the king’s original intention. For ‘him’, who had committed the greatest sin of betrayal, the king had always treated him with a pure and noble friendship even to the very end.

That noble king was so ‘correct’. How could anyone hate or despise that monarch?

However – if that was the case, then to whom should ‘his’ regret and her tears be dumped upon?

The hatred ‘he’ brought to the grave was extracted at the end of time’s long passage, and tormented ‘him’ for an eternity on the Throne of Heroes that had no end… And then ‘he’ finally heard the call from afar.

Come, mad beast.

Come, stubborn vengeful spirit. That sound from the end of time had called.

That sound woke ‘his’ long-held wish.

Had ‘he’ not been a knight.

Had 'he' been a beast knowing no honor and had no reason, had 'he' been a demon fallen into the league of beasts, maybe 'he' could have avenged this hatred and regret.

Yes, madness was the road to salvation.

A beast would not be lost. Therefore, it would not feel pain. No one expected anything of it, no one entrusted anything to it. If ‘he’ could become a beast and direct the movement of ‘his’ limbs with nothing but ‘his’ own desire –

This wish became the connection that linked ‘him’ with the end of time, and placed ‘him’ on this battlefield that ‘he’ cared and knew nothing about.

'He’ had long ago forgotten ‘his’ name, long ago forgotten ‘his’ disciplined vow. ‘His’ body only existed to perform the murderous skills that ‘his’ hands had long been drenched in. The pride that took shame in this no longer existed, and the heart that regretted was lost as well. This was who ‘he’ currently was – the existence called ‘Berserker’.

There were no regrets. To fall, to be freed, that was what ‘he’ had sought.

Moreover, the merciless hand of Fate had even arranged such an ironic rendezvous.

"... Ar… thur…”

The call that slipped out of 'his' lips no longer meant anything.

Even so, this silver swordsman who now knelt in the torrential rain was undoubtedly that person whom 'he' had both loved and hated in the past.

That noble visage and that majestic and solemn face, which innumerable hopes and blessings had been bestowed upon, was now kneeling in front of despair. Now the king knew the truth that had been hidden for so long, knew the hatred that had been buried in eternal darkness. The king forgot the pride of a monarch and mourned.

– Do you hate me so much, my friend? –

Yes, that’s what I wanted to see – the beast in his heart cried, the knight in his heart sobbed. Savor it well. Now you know how many tears we’ve shed for your transient glory, how we have annihilated ourselves, wasted our days, and sat in emptiness waiting for old age.

Now was the time when his buried injustice would be revenged. The fallen black knight lifted his sword of vengeance up high.

– Do you hate me so much, Knight of the Lake?! –

Ah. Yes, that’s right.

At the time, had I not been a knight, but only lived as a man –

Had I not been a loyal subject, but hated you as a human –

Then, perhaps, I could have saved that woman!

-03:54:28

The battle tactic analysis concerning Kotomine Kirei – was conducted based on information from Hisau Maiya, who had fought him twice.

He threw Black Keys for ranged battle. A single throw, together with preparatory movements, can be completed in 0.3 seconds. As for continuous throwing, it had been confirmed that he can complete four throws in 0.7 seconds. He can also attack without obstacles toward unconfirmed targets. The power of the blades, half-spiritual entities, can penetrate iron. Chances of a hit – 100% when he is using illusions.

He used Baji Quan for melee fighting. Although the details were unclear, he was indeed at the level of an expert. He had seriously injured Maiya, who had a dagger, with just one blow. The destructive power of this kind of attack can snap a tree with two blows, and was extraordinarily dangerous.

The frock covering his entire body had been reinforced with bullet-proof materials and processed to protect against spells. It can defend against the impact and the penetration power of 9mm Parabellum bullets.

As for the result of pre-battle intelligence gathered from other fields – according to the magecraft teaching result report obtained from Tōsaka Tokiomi, Kotomine Kirei's level of magecraft learning had not progressed beyond the degree of a beginner. His most outstanding skill was simply spiritual healing. If he were to use any effective measures during battle, then the only predictable one would be physical enhancement; his most adept skill, used to exert even greater physical strength.

Lastly, predicting his battle tactics.

Since Emiya Kiritsugu had thoroughly hid himself, the most information Kotomine Kirei could get to analyze Kiritsugu's tactics would consist of rumors. The only battle in this Heaven's Feel that forced Kiritsugu to use his 'secret weapon' was the fight against Lord El-Melloi. The bounded field of the Einzbern Castle at that time was still dense enough to prevent the Assassins from penetrating. Moreover, Kirei himself was tied down in the battle with Maiya and Irisivel during that time. In conclusion, it was impossible for Kirei to know about Innate Time Control and the 'Origin Bullet'. It can be concluded that he would not have countermeasures for these.

– The above was all the information that Emiya Kiritsugu had gathered concerning the final decisive battle.

Firstly, their initial wave of attacks consists of Black Keys versus bullets. Of course, Kirei would be in an overwhelmingly disadvantageous position. However, if he wanted to rely on magecraft to compensate for his lack in weaponry, then it would be very possible for Kirei to rush up fearlessly and shorten the distance between them.

At last, the Executor waved the wing-like six Black Keys and rushed toward Kiritsugu from the front. It seemed that he had made the defensive preparations for Kiritsugu's bullets.

That was exactly what Kiritsugu had wanted. Kiritsugu could ensure the success of his killing blow precisely because Kirei had made defensive measure. It was because he was firing the magecraft bullet from his Mystic Code.

With the belief that the early bird gets the worm, Kiritsugu fired toward his opponent. Kirei should have been able to completely predict the trajectory of the bullet from Kiritsugu's killing aura and preparatory actions. As a humanoid Shura, an Executor of the Holy Church, the quickness of Kirei's mind far surpassed that of a bullet.

Kirei initiated a large scale magecraft.

The Black Keys that he grasped with both hands instantly swelled up into more than twice their original size. The half-spiritual blades, which were woven with magecraft to begin with, had extra prana instilled into them and were completely 'strengthened'. Although the forceful execution of this spell evidently surpassed the limit of the weapons themselves, it was enough to handle one bullet. Kirei crossed the six enormous swords before his chest and held them in fan-like formation. The mighty destructive power of the .30-06 Springfield assault rifle bullet was completely sealed off in an instant.

The bullet was deflected away together with flying sparks. At the same time the Black Keys, which had been filled with too much prana, could no longer handle the heavy load and shattered completely.

This extraordinary skill, which allowed swords to surpass bullets, now became a wrong move. It was truly shocking that Kirei, who shouldn't even have a Magic Crest, could exert such a surprising skill. But more importantly, this would allow the fatal destruction of Kirei's Magic Circuits, which were currently serving as a sack full of energy. Due to Emiya Kiritsugu's repulsion towards the 'Origin', Kirei's flesh would

instantly be annihilated due to the magecraft running rampant in his body – that was what was supposed to happen.

A rapidly approaching figure clad in black frock suddenly appeared within the fragments of the six Black Keys, which were scattering away. Kiritsugu couldn't help but gasp in surprise.

"Time alter——double accel!"

His body reacted sooner than his brain while he remained in shock. Kiritsugu chanted a spell.

Kiritsugu jumped backward at the last moment. Kirei's right foot ferociously swept past the tip of Kiritsugu's nose, and the left foot that followed up the attack didn't land on Kiritsugu's neck either. Kirei's smooth roundhouse kicking attack completely missed its target under the confusion caused by Kiritsugu's double-speed movement.

That was not within the scope of his predictions. The 'Origin Bullet' fired from his magecraft Contender gun was nullified – Kiritsugu couldn't figure out the reason no matter what. Meanwhile, Kirei didn't know the reason for Kiritsugu's surprise. Even Kirei wouldn't have imagined that the uniqueness of his magecraft had surprisingly nullified Kiritsugu's killing blow.

Kirei had never been an orthodox magus. Kirei, whose Magic Circuits were yet to be developed properly, only obtained a source of prana through utilizing the spare Command Seals he received from Risei so he could instantly learn how to use magecraft. Although the characteristics of the Command Seals meant they were disposables which would disappear upon use, it had managed to save Kirei at the end. The moment that the magecraft was activated and the 'Origin Bullet' made contact to exert the effect, the Command Seal that served as the source of prana had simply disappeared from Kirei's arm.

Having his one-turn-kill plan completely disrupted, Kiritsugu could only progress onto his next step. He did not expect the opponent to attack back. Although in terms of the result, Kirei's attack would only be a waste of efforts, the overwhelming destructive power of his martial arts was evident. This man is a high-level martial artist, and Kiritsugu won't have any chances of victory if he was pulled into melee fighting with him.

Kiritsugu ignored the damage Innate Time Control gave him as a side effect and maintained its activation and escaped Kirei's range at once. Firstly, he had to

increase the distance between them, otherwise he would have no chance. Kiritsugu would be able to deal with Kirei if the other simply threw Black Keys, but the current competition had become an authentic contest of ‘distance’. Kiritsugu was retreating, while Kirei was advancing. Since the ideal distance for them to initiate an attack differed between the two men, now they could only compete their speed on foot.

The power of mobility that Innate Time Control gave to him was Kiritsugu’s most reliable defence. Firstly, a certain distance was needed to fill the Contender bullets. As long As Kiritsugu was at a relatively close distance where his enemy’s fists won’t hit him, but at the same time won’t be able to predict the bullet’s path and thus escape, then he would be able to surely finish the enemy this time. Even if the bullet contained no magecraft, the bulletproof vests that the enemy wore which had been mentioned in Maiya’s report would not be able to stop the innate penetration power of these hunting bullets that can kill even large beasts in one shot. Though he understood that the continuous activation of Innate Time Control was nothing less than suicide, he had no other choices at this moment.

However – Even then, Kiritsugu still underestimated the man Kotomine Kirei.

It wasn’t due to Kiritsugu’s overly-fast speed or a miscalculation that caused Kirei’s roundhouse kick to go off the mark. Kiritsugu’s movement wasn’t so nimble that Kirei was completely unable to grasp it. Once he understood that Kiritsugu was only moving at twice the speed of normal human – Kirei also made appropriate calculations.

Therefore, Kiritsugu immediately experienced surprised for the second time.

The space between them was more than five steps. The tall Executor took a slight step forward, and shortened this seemingly safe distance. This step, which sneaked toward the enemy along the ground without announcing its speed, was called ‘the moving stance’. It was also one of the dangerous secret skills of Baji Quan.

The tall, frock-clad figure slid in front of Kiritsugu like a Reaper, while Kiritsugu was shivering all over. Baji Quan can exert its greatest power at this distance. Kirei’s fist smashed down heavily toward the enemy with the power to reach infinity in all eight directions…

Kirei stepped forward. The concrete floor boomed under the impact, and the heavily planted forward fist smashed against Kiritsugu’s chest like a rock. Using the ‘Eight Postures of the Buddha Guards’ style, Kirei’s single blow had the same power as a

grenade exploding in front of someone's chest. Kiritsusu's body, which took the full force of the blow, flew out into the air like a strand of hay and slammed into the support pillars that crowded the room. He never had the chance to defend himself. His thoracic cavity tore apart under the heavy hit of Kirei's iron fist, and his lung and heart were pounded into nothing more than a mesh of meat.

Kirei remained clutching his fist and experienced the feel of death on his hand, and at the same time sighed slowly. Even a fight to the death, in which every second mattered, took only one moment to decide the victor. He experienced an emptiness that he had never felt before the moment he attained victory. This had originally been an end that he had pursued with a crazed fervor.

This lethargy made Kirei's focus dull. He didn't know that the opponent would actually sneak in an attack at this momentary gap. Nor did he realize that he would be the next to experience surprise.

There was a piercing pain between his brows, and the splashing red covered his field of sight.

The sound of gunfire beside his ears made Kirei instinctively raise his arms to shield his head before he understood what was going on. A rain of 9mm bullets was mercilessly showered upon him. The sleeves, which were made of Kevlar and covered in protective sigils, barely managed against the force of the bullets. Kirei was stunned.

Even Kiritsugu did not expect himself to be revived. He had already been prepared to die when Kirei neared him. In truth, Kiritsugu's heart and lungs had indeed been completely destroyed, and the best he could manage should have been a final struggle.

However, seconds before his blood-deprived brain was about to die due to lack of oxygen, the heavy and uncontrollable injury on his body had healed completely by itself. Of course, Kiritsugu didn't use any healing magecraft. Nonetheless, Kiritsugu had no doubts concerning this shocking miracle. He immediately understood what was going on.

The Noble Phantasm, Avalon – the holy relic that had summoned Saber and had been kept by Old Man Acht, the sheath of the holy sword that had protected Irisviel's body for so long. Kiritsugu obtained this sheath when he separated from his wife, this sword sheath that can prevent aging and possesses a mighty healing power.

Since it had been sealed inside Kiritsugu's body, who was Saber's authentic Master, the sheath could obtain prana from Saber and exert its effect in full according to the contract.

Although Kiritsugu understood its ability, he had never confirmed it with his own eyes. Therefore, he did not expect the sheath to be able to heal fatal injuries. The current situation was completely unpredicted for him. Kiritsugu was indeed admirable; he began to consider battle tactics as soon as he realized that he had been revived. He didn't open his eyes, and he suppressed the urge to cough as his body began to breathe again, and pretended to be dead while waiting for the chance to launch a surprise attack.

Unfortunately, the Contender in his right hand still needed a bullet to fill it. If he were really to attack the other at unawares, then he could only use his left hand to take out the short automatic machine gun from the holster on his chest and fire. However, since Kirei's strategies against bullets were perfect, Kiritsugu must aim at his head if he were to have a chance at victory.

It was awkward angle, and he could only fire instinctively. Moreover, the target was very small. Kiritsugu, who was a master shooter, managed a hit even though these three obstacles presented themselves before him. However, though the bullet hit its target, Kirei's head was not shot through. Only the skin on his brow was scraped. Bullets can easily be deflected off their effective angles since the skull is made of curves, and therefore it is a rule in real battles to avoid aiming at the head.

Kiritsugu adjusted the machine gun into full automatic mode after he understood his surprise attack had failed, and sealed Kirei's movements using a tight wall of suppressive fire. At the same time, he used his right hand to take out the empty shell in the Contender's barrel. Although it was hard to use only his left hand to control the machine gun's kickback inertia, which was as ferocious and wild as an untamed horse, Kiritsugu's right hand still managed to fluently carry out a series of movements. It was as if he had trained himself into a war machine.

What was more worthy of praise was his strength of mind. Even though his two hands were engaged in two completely different tasks, he actually managed to chant out a spell with a superhuman concentration.

"Time alter——double accel!"

The time within his body changed. Kiritsugu threw everything to the wind in order to maximally use the tiny gap that he had managed to steal from this strong enemy.

He drove his accelerated limbs and leapt up from the ground, jumping backwards to further the distance. The machine gun ran out of bullets. Kirei adjusted his pose. Kiritsugu threw away the machine gun and grabbed a .30-06 bullet with his now empty left hand. Kirei loomed near. With a near-flight speed – Kiritsugu filled the Contender's open barrel with the bullet. He closed the barrel half-way, took aim –

A space of three steps separated him from Kirei's iron fists.

The Contender once again let out a furious roar. Kirei had no time to dodge, nor did he have time to pull out Black Keys.

Actually, Kirei never intended to dodge.

Kirei once again activated his Command Seals the moment he stepped toward Kiritsugu. He strengthened his physical abilities – he accelerated his reaction time and multiplied the maximum power output of his right flexor, radius muscle, and pronator teres muscle. There was no time to strengthen the sleeve of the bulletproof frock. The rest depended on his skill.

Kirei moved his right arm again before the Contender shot out a bullet. His arm, having transformed into a lethal megacraft Mystic Code, carved a spiral in the air and a tornado roared into being.

This movement became a spiralling force. It had originally been a defensive skill to nullify the opponent's fists, but it had been performed at an extraordinary speed after the prana of two Command Seals had been infused into it.

The bullet, which left the barrel at a speed of 2500 inches per second, was wrapped into the spiral that moved at a divine speed. Even so, the .30-06 bullet still kept a straight path. It tore apart the Kevlar sleeves and clashed viciously with Kirei's hardened arm, emitting alien sounds like the clash of two mill stones.

The scattering sparks distorted the usual laws of physics. It was a supernatural phenomena where the approximately 3000 pound per inch kinetic energy bent its knees to the power of prana. Kiritsugu felt a chill creeping up his skin as he watched the second Contender bullet had its trajectory forcibly changed and flew off toward the distance.

Monster – he didn't know how to describe this man apart from that word. At this moment, Kotomine Kirei's battle prowess could probably be considered that of a desperate man. Just what kind of a willpower was required for a living man to drill his own body into such a terrifying lethal weapon?

A piercing pain suddenly invaded his entire body. With a moan, Kiritsugu stumbled. His body had reached its limit due to the continuous activation of Innate Time Control. The blood vessels all around his body had ruptured, and the bones in his limbs also began to fracture due to having borne an unimaginable burden.

However, Kirei did not follow up his attack during this pause. He remained where he stood and did not move, as if he was observing the opponent's next move. Large amounts of blood gushed out of his right arm where the frock sleeve was torn. It was probably because he had used too much prana with his unskilled method. His right arm, which had been overly strengthened by magecraft, was severely wounded as the price for having blocked the Contender's blow.

The two men kept their disdainful eyes on each other, and analyzed the situation as they each thought of their next move.

According to Kirei's analysis, Kiritsugu's strategy – consisted of a magecraft that can accelerate his movement and a healing power that could even revive the caster even if the heart was destroyed. In other words, Kirei had to admit that he could not win no matter how heavy a wound he may deal to the enemy, unless he could destroy Kiritsugu's brain with one blow. As for himself… his right arm had been damaged from the muscle to the bone, and he could only manage one more blow even if he was prepared to shatter his entire right fist. On the other hand, although the wound on his forehead wasn't deep, the blood that seeped out had affected the sight of his left eye. The bulletproof ability of the frock had also been severely reduced since he had been shot at multiple times, and only the protective sigils close to his body remained intact. He had twelve Black Keys and eight Command Seals left.

According to Kiritsugu's analysis, Kirei's strategy – consisted of an unknown prana source that can nullify his 'Origin Bullet', and his ultimate Baji Quan skills. Melee fighting would be extremely disadvantageous for him. As for himself… he had lost his machine gun and the Contender needed to be filed again. His remaining weapons consist of one dagger and two grenades. The heavy wound that his chest

had obtained at first had all but healed and won't affect his movements, but he didn't know about the damage caused by Innate Time Control –

Kiritsugu finally felt that there was something different when he attempted to tighten the muscles on his arms and legs.

He could move them; there were no difficulties. The bones which had definitely snapped a while ago were now in perfect condition, as if they had never been damaged – no, he could still feel the echo of that pain in his body, but there were no injuries.

"… I see."

Kiritsugu finally understood the true worth of this trump card within his body. It seemed Avalon not only could heal injuries dealt by his enemies, but also the damages dealt by himself. This discovery gave Kiritsugu, whom had fallen into a desperate situation by fighting with an unimaginably strong enemy, the greatest confidence in the world.

Which means –

"Time alter——triple accel!"

Kiritsugu boldly leapt toward Kirei at the same time that he muttered that forbidden spell. His completely unpredictable acceleration caught Kirei off-guard. One blow from the hardened walnut wood smashed Kirei's right radius and ulna. This time, his right arm was completely ruined.

As the same time that he struck out viciously with his right arm, Kiritsugu drew out the dagger by his waist using his left hand. He concluded that it didn't matter how great a threat Kirei's martial art skills may prove to be; victory would belong to Kiritsugu as long as he kept moving at three times the speed of a normal human. Using Innate Time Control in this way would ordinarily be suicide, but he could now use it to its full potential as a strategic weapon thanks to the protection of Saber's sheath.

Kirei dodged the upward stab as the dagger was removed from its sheath, and used his left arm to block the downward slash and backhand horizontal swing Kiritsugu followed up with. However, Kiritsugu edged toward Kirei's left side using these three attacks, and prepared to use Kirei's blind spot – due to his left eye's ruined eyesight – as his advantage. As long as he stayed to the enemy's left side, Kiritsugu would have all the chances in the world to successfully succumb Kirei from his blind spot.

Kiritsugu's sharp blade crept nearer, but Kirei didn't turn and used his left side of the body to block everything. Turning around would have been pointless; his broken right arm could not possibly block Kiritsugu's dagger. Therefore, though it was very disadvantageous for Kirei to use his left side of the body to defend himself, he had no other choices.

The dagger attacked continuously as it flashed with a chilling light. Ordinary humans would never have been able to see Kiritsugu's movement, and could only have captured the lighting-like residual images of the dagger. However, Kirei blocked every single attack using just his left hand. Kirei, who easily defended himself even when faced with attacks made at three times the speed of normal humans, terrified Kiritsugu. There were a few attacks that Kirei would never have seen coming with his eyes, but the Executor's left arm made effective defences as if it had grown eyes.

"Could this be the idea of – 'hearing' a move!?"

Kiritsugu only had a vague impression of this phrase. It had been said that when a martial artist had reached a certain advanced state in his skills, he wouldn't need eyesight to detect the enemy's movement. He could predict the opponent's next move purely on the brief moment when his arm touched that of his opponent.

Then the attacks from his blind spot had also been rendered pointless. Since the direction the attacks were coming from weren't changing, Kirei could block them even if he couldn't see them. This man's skills made him someone who wouldn't be at a disadvantage even when put under the duress of speed.

Kiritsugu's arms, legs, and heart let out sad screams of excruciating pain with every swing of the dagger. The adverse effect of Innate Time Control was also mercilessly tearing apart Kiritsugu's flesh. At the same time, Avalon was also fixing the damage. Regardless of how Saber herself had used it, the sheath was only 'healing' Kiritsugu while in his body; in other words, it was only nullifying the 'damages received'. That meant the excruciating pain of torn tendons and snapped bones were tormenting Kiritsugu's nerves every single moment.

Even so, Kiritsugu did not hesitate. There was no need to hesitate. As long as his body could maintain its functions, he didn't need to pay any attention to what he was feeling. Kiritsugu bet everything on the effect of the sheath of the holy sword, and continued to accelerate against the normal time flow as if his life depended on it.

"Whoaaaaaaaaa!!"

Kiritsugu's body was reborn at the same time as it was dying. Kiritsugu shrieked out of agony while he swung his dagger, aiming for the enemy before him. His blood vessels, which endlessly repeated a cycle of rupture and repair, shed out sanguineous mists with his every move.

Kirei suddenly changed his feet stance, and rolled forward towards his left. Kiritsugu had thought that the enemy's ability to 'hear' a move had been pushed to its limit, but Kirei unexpectedly used his feet to hook one of Kiritsugu's legs from the inside. This legwork was named 'the locking stance'. Kiritsugu immediately stumbled backwards. After he finally managed to balance himself, he realized that a heavy blow from Kirei was fast approaching. However, since his weight had shifted backwards, he would definitely be hit.

If so – Kiritsugu squeezed out a spell from his throat that was frothing with blood.

"Time alter ——square accel!"

The explosive pain boiled into every part of his senses. Kiritsugu leapt up and backwards, and turned in mid-air to escape out of Kirei's range of attack. At the same time, he threw out the dagger in his left hand with all the strength in his body. Faced with this shocking repeated acceleration, Kirei couldn't dodge no matter how good his 'move-hearing' skills were. The dagger tore through air and flew toward Kirei's thigh. The Kevlar fibres were pierced through and the sharp blade stabbed deep into flesh.

Kiritsugu maintained his four-time acceleration and continued to leap backwards as if there was a throttle equipped on him. He had moved about ten meters away from Kirei in the blink of an eye. Kirei took the opportunity to take out a Black Key and throw at him, but Kiritsugu dodged it with ease and began to refill the Contender at the same time.

He pulled it and opened the barrel.

Kirei rushed up. He paid no attention to the dagger, which was still sticking out of his left leg. Even the fact that the sharp blade was tearing the wound open wider as he ran did not cause him to hesitate any.

The expelled cartridge danced in the air; the light of the golden bronze sparkled.

Kirei pulled out four Black Keys with his left hand. That was the limit to the number he can wield in one hand.

Kiritsugu put the new bullet into the barrel. The bullet slide in easily, but this split second had seemed so long in the quadruple-accelerated time.

Kirei threw his Black Keys, not to the front, but upwards. The four sharp blades danced in the air beneath the tall ceiling of the large prop warehouse like boomerangs. Kirei didn't plan to use the Black Keys for a normal attack; Kiritsugu didn't know his intentions. Moreover, there was no time to ponder Kirei's intention at this moment.

With one flick upwards, the gun barrel was closed. The Contender once again transformed into that heinous murder weapon.

Kirei was getting close. He again used his martial art stances to shorten the distance between him and Kiritsugu, but he won't be getting any nearer. Right now, Kiritsugu would definitely be able to dodge him and fire at the same time.

The Black Keys landed from above him. Kiritsugu finally perceived Kirei's tactics when the four sharp blades surrounded him in all directions like a bird cage.

Sealing his movements – if Kiritsugu wanted to dodge Kirei's sudden advance, there the sharp blades of the Black Keys would be waiting for him no matter where he moved toward. Kirei's intention had always been to seal Kiritsugu's movements when he threw the Black Keys.

The only way to stay alive was to fire before he was attacked.

Kiritsugu aimed with Contender. There was no need to be anxious, no need to be fearful. All he needed to do was focus on firing at the enemy in front of him.

Kirei stepped on the ground viciously with his right foot and leapt forward. This leap equaled to about five normal steps. His left foot would likely be broken the moment he land, but it didn't matter; the following blow would decide the victor. There was no need to hold back; his entire body had been fully prepared. His goal was to perform one of the Eight Grand Openings – The Standing Upward Cannon. The smashing upper hook would definitely shatter the opponent's skull into pieces.

I will win – both men believed firmly in that.

I will die – both men understood that fact.

The fist and the gun that contained the will for a sure kill finally completed their last exchange.

Emiya Kiritsugu and Kotomine Kirei, who were deeply engrossed in battle, did not notice the abnormality above them.

Directly above the big prop warehouse where the two men were, Irisviel's already-cold corpse was placed upon the raised stage of the music hall.

As the 'Guardian', she had almost lost all signs of life. The organs within her body had already reverted to the form of the Vessel of the Grail, and was waiting to recollect the souls of the remaining Servants.

After Archer's victory, this vessel had finally absorbed the soul of the fourth Servant.

The sealing enchantment had already disappeared. Having gathered enormous amounts of prana, its residual waves brought scorching heat to its surroundings.

The corpse of the beautiful homunculus was completely consumed by the heat in the blink of an eye, and was reduced to ashes. That was not all. The golden cup that had contacted the outside air charred the floor and the curtains, and roaring flames enveloped the completely empty stage.

On the stage where the fire was raging ever wilder, the golden cup floated in the air as if it was upheld by a pair of invisible hands. The ceremony of the descent of the Holy Grail, which the Three Noble Families of the Beginning had desired so much, had begun silently even without the presence of a priest.

Then – a gap no wider than the width of a hair, so minute and almost invisible, appeared on the 'Gate' that remained tightly closed. Through this tiny gap, something beyond the Gate silently seeped into the Holy Grail.

That thing seemed very similar to 'mud'. It was black, simply and only black, a 'thing' that seemed like mud.

The thing that seeped into the Holy Grail suddenly overflew by one drop, then another drop. It soon became a thin black line. Like a crack that had appeared on a dam, the black torrents soon completely overflew out of the vessel and drained toward the stage floor.

The strength of the stage floor could not bear that inky black substance at all. The dirty mud seeped into the brand new building materials, eroding them, and flew even deeper like how the water from melted snow seeps into land.

The moment that the trigger of the magecraft gun was pressed –

The moment the floor moaned from the heavy step –

In that moment, Kiritsugu only saw Kirei, and Kirei only saw Kiritsugu.

The two of them did not detect that thing, which dribbled down through the ceiling, even till the end.

At that brief moment between life and death, the two men were drenched with the black dirty mud that descended from above.

-03:52:18

Now, pain had become everything to Kariya.

Whether it was the human called Matō Kariya that could feel pain, or that the concept of pain had been stuck into the body of this trash that was called Kariya—there was no longer any difference between the two. He felt that none of this mattered any more.

Which part of him hurt for what reason, why he had to experience this sort of torment—he had never known these causes and effects.

It hurt to breathe. It hurt for his heart to beat. It hurt to think. It hurt to remember.

There was nowhere to run, nothing that could be done. It seemed that he had felt like this before, but he could not remember. Perhaps he had already given up on himself.

The worms were crying within his body. The worms were writhing their bodies in pain. The culprit of his torment was at this moment also making its final struggle.

Berserker. It must be because of that resentful black spirit. At this moment Berserker was fighting; because the prana he required far exceeded that which his Master could provide, he had gone beyond control. The worms were suffering because they had been drained of too much prana, and so they tore at Kariya's internal organs, ceaselessly struggling.

But that could not be helped; there was no other way.

Berserker must fight—that was what that priest had said. Kariya no longer remembered his name—but they had both made an agreement; he had agreed to let Kariya have the Grail, therefore Berserker must fight.

The Grail—at this moment only it meant everything to Kariya.

As long as he had the Grail, the war could end. As long as he had the Grail, Sakura could be saved.

There seemed to be something else, but remembering was really too painful. Those must be things outside the range of his thoughts.

Kariya did not even know what this place was. At first he had been in icy darkness, but now he felt a strange heat, and even breathing was difficult. He thought he smelled something burning; perhaps it was his own body that had been burned, but

that didn’t matter. In any case his body could not move; what was most important now was Berserker’s fight—and— saving Sakura.

Sakura—ah, he would really like to see her one more time. He would really like to see that child.

But not Rin; he couldn’t see her. He mustn’t see her—no, but why was that, again?

Even thinking made him feel pain. His brain, his consciousness and his soul were all being crushed.

There was something strange. It seemed that something important had happened. Something was wrong.

Though he had become aware that something was different, Kariya’s thoughts were quickly caught up once again in endless torment.

It hurt—

There was only pain. And suffering—

For the countless time, she was thrown into the air.

For the countless time, she was effortlessly beaten to the ground. Saber had given up counting, because she could no longer remember.

The strongest sword-wielding Servant? Who had fabricated this? —Now she was like a small boat in a storm. Facing Berserker’s waving black sword, she could only give up resistance and suffer the attack; she could not even make a single decent retaliatory blow. She did not even feel indignant at this. Her heart, immersed in hopelessness, had long since become devoid of all fighting spirit. She was no longer the heroic King of Knights that was named the incarnation of the dragon. This was truly too tragic; it made one sigh.

She should be going to save Irisviel; they had made a vow to hold up the Grail together. She could not lower her head now; she knew this clearly in her heart.

But she could not win. Facing that man, that sword, there was no way to obtain victory.

'Arondight • The Indestructible Light of the Lake’—the counterpart to King Arthur’s ‘Sword of Promised Victory’, the most precious of swords that had been obtained by men from the fairy lands.

That sword had been dyed pitch-black; the prana from his body, filled with resentment, had caused the sword by his side to also fall to become the sword of a mad warrior.

He had been the unrivalled ‘perfect knight’ admired by the masses; he had been a flower that bloomed on the precipitous peak of the way of the knight. His form and his actions had once been the greatest treasure of all who had the ambition of becoming a knight.

And yet he had committed himself to madness. Hatred roiled within the red eyes; at the same time he gave out an animalistic howl.

He roared, I hate you.

He roared, I curse you.

Exactly how was she to avoid the sword that he brandished downward full of hatred?

She could not look at him directly. Her sight blurred in tears, her legs buckled down weakly. At this moment, all Saber could do with all her strength was to protect her body before suffering the fatal impact.

Sir Lancelot, Knight of the Lake.

Now that she thought of it, the clues to his identity were everywhere.

Once he had hidden his name for the sake of a friend’s honor, disguising himself to enter a horse race. Even though he had fallen into a trap, and faced the enemy’s sharp blades with only his bare hands, he had won the victory with his skilled fighting prowess using only an elm branch.

But even though she noticed, Saber would definitely not admit it. That he who had been the subject of people’s admiration would be reduced to a Berserker—how could he be that ‘Knight of the Lake’?

Saber had once believed that they were friends. Even if their armies had clashed because of some unavoidable reasons, their hearts were nevertheless still the same. One was a subject that upheld the way of the knight, the other, a king who upheld the way of the knight.

But was this sort of partnership also only a naïve fantasy of her own?

He had never forgiven, never accepted. Even after his death, he had still cursed with resentment that ending, that tragic fate.

Lancelot and Guinevere had loved each other—yet Arturia had not seen this inescapably unrighteous action as a betrayal; this had all happened because the King had concealed her gender. The one who had to carry the burden of this conflict all her life was Guinevere.

Arturia had understood the severity of this sacrifice, and expressed thankfulness to her (2). There was also guilt in it. But for Lancelot who had fallen in love with her, she had even felt relief. This person who had the same ideals as the King would not cause the country to fall into a dangerous situation; she believed that he would share the burden with her. And in truth, he had indeed done so. Though he had fallen into the dilemma of having stepped onto an unrighteous path, he had supported Guinevere from the dark, supported the King.

That he had been exposed like a piece of ugly news, causing the two to have to stand opposed, was the single-handed plan of the traitors who hated Camelot. Because Lancelot could not sit and watch as the girl he loved was killed, Arturia could not but deal with him in the capacity of a king.

No one was wrong, but precisely because everyone was right, a tragedy had occurred.

In that case, Arturia had always fought upright with the status of a King to the very end.

Therefore, when facing the battlefield on the hill that had been dyed red with blood, she was able to argue with Heaven about the unfairness of fate.

If one carried out all the paths of striving for something, but could not obtain the right result, then it was definitely Heaven who was at fault.

In that case, she could only forever lift her head up high if the Grail that can fulfil miracles existed. Precisely because she believed — therefore she fought.

But—

"[illegible] = ! !”

Before Arondite’s relentless attack, Saber’s holy sword gave out a groan. Her sword of light that promised victory—it had long since become meaningless, in the hands of its owner who had lost the will to fight. Berserker constantly rebuked Saber, who was unable to counterattack and could only defend. At this point he had already completely unleashed his true ability, and his skill with the sword was completely

incomparable with his previous level. Even if Saber had been uninjured right now, she might not have been able to withstand that strong momentum.

But in the face of her opponent's ferocious attack, and the sense of pain in her hands and legs that had long since become numb, Saber remained unmoved. The enemy's strong prowess that was many times greater than her own, and his merciless attack, were gradually causing her spirit to crumble.

Ahah, my friend… Is this your true intention?

Do you despair thus at fate? Are you truly using hatred to curse the king and country that brought you despair?

Once we had embraced the same dream, and put our lives on the line for the sake of saving the country.

If there was no difference in our ambition, then why do you hate thus? Do you regret now?

—One cannot lead by salvation alone—

No. Tell me it is not like this.

Lancelot. Only you. I hope you can understand, because you truly are the people's ideal knight.

I hope that you can nod in agreement that our methods are entirely correct…

—Abandoning the people who have lost their way, desiring to become a saint on one's own—

"Stop!!"

Relying on the last of her reason, Saber blocked the black sword that fell heavily down; at the same time, she used all her strength to shout.

"Stop… please…"

Within the sound of sobbing, her knees fell weakly to the ground.

She couldn’t move; she had reached her limit. There was no way to defend against the next attack.

Perhaps this was the only salvation.

Since he was thus unwilling, thus filled with hatred—in that case, apart from using her body to receive the sharp sword that he swung, there was no other method of recompense.

At the exact moment that Saber decided to completely abandon resistance—suddenly, Berserker stopped moving.

Saber and Berserker could not have known that about ten seconds ago, the Crest Worms within the body of Kariya — who was hiding in the equipment room of the underground parking area – had ceased their activity. In order to sustain Berserker in the physical reality, the prana in Kariya’s body — which had already been in short supply — was absorbed in great amounts, and this need for prana was multiplied manifold when the final Noble Phantasm was unleashed. Finally, the Crest Worms were exhausted by their too-heavy burden.

And the backup prana, that could originally have sustained the Servant in physical form for several hours in the circumstance that the Master was not around, had also been consumed completely in ten seconds due to Berserker’s outburst (1). In this instant, the prana that drove this killing machine suddenly dried up, causing Berserker to come to an emergency halt as if having malfunctioned.

In the abrupt silence, Saber’s hand could clearly feel Berserker’s gradually fading heartbeat. The hilt of her sword tightly gripped in her hand, the sharp blade of her beloved sword pierced the black armor.

This ending was truly too ironic; who could have foreseen it?

In this fleeting instant, the victory had been decided; a slight feeling of greed made Saber ashamed of herself, and she could not but shed tears.

She knew that she should not have killed him, but had nevertheless struck a killing blow on this person that should not have been killed. Now Saber was only a prisoner to an idea—just like Diarmuid had rebuked her at the last moment, she who had stepped over countless corpses desired only the miracles of the wish-granting machine. This was the truest face of Saber in this moment.

"Even thus, I still want the Grail.”

Tears fell onto trembling gauntlets, mingling with the blood of Berserker which had slid down the blade.

"If I do not do this, my friend… If I do not do this, then I will be unable to give you any sort of recompense at all."

"—Saddening indeed. Things have come to this, and you still make excuses to fight?"

A voice that inspired nostalgia.

She raised her head to look across. The knight's gaze was just as it was before, calm as the tranquil surface of a lake as he looked upon the King's tear-stained face. Having discarded the contract with his Master, in the time before he vanished, he had been released from the spell of madness.

"Lancelot…"

"Yes… Thank you. Perhaps, this is the only way I can convey my longing."

Looking upon the sword that pierced his body with a gaze filled with compassion, Lancelot smiled wryly as he continued to speak.

"Actually… at that time I had hoped that you would personally punish me. My King… At that time I really wished that you would denounce me out of your own anger…"

The traitor knight, Lancelot who was called the culprit of the split of the Round Table — thus he spoke with sorrow to his only friend, who had never blamed him even until the very end.

"If I could have been punished by you… If you had demanded recompense from me… Then I would definitely believe in redemption… I would definitely believe that one day I can find a way to forgive myself. … The Queen is probably the same…"

This was—the regret of one man and one woman. They embraced the same ideal as the King, but because they had been too weak, they had not been able to carry this ideal through.

And these two people had, even in death, not been able to obtain salvation. They had blamed themselves deeply for having betrayed a most important person, and the burden of this self-blame they had carried for a lifetime.

Pain such as this—to whom could it have been told? Exactly what kind of admonishment, and dealt to whom, could have given them respite?

Sighing deeply, Lancelot relaxed his body, falling into the embrace of the King. The body in her arms was very light; Saber could not but feel a lump in her throat. The Servant's gradually fading body seemed to be almost weightless.

"Even though it is in this way, in the end I still did borrow your chest…"

As if dreaming during a nap, the Knight of the Lake quietly whispered and sighed.

"To die in the King's arms, before the King's eyes… haha, like this it is really… as if I am a loyal knight…"

"You - shouldn't say that - "

Saber anxiously answered. Before he disappeared, there was something that she needed to tell him. She hoped that he would understand.

Not 'as if'. It was 'indeed is'.

She wanted to tell him, you are a loyal knight. No one knows better than I—the sincerity you devoted to the country, to the King.

So there was no more need for self-reproach. Even if it had been a mistake that was not allowed to be made—your character is not something that can be overturned by a single mistake.

I don't want to shame you; I don't want to lose you. Precisely because I have this wish, I can truly deny this so-called crime that you have committed.

These were Arturia's true thoughts, but—could not become that knight's salvation.

The knight closed his eyes as if sleeping soundly; his body was gradually dissipating. Saber saw that he was about to vanish, but nevertheless could not think of what would be the right thing to say.

"Lancelot, actually you…!"

You are not a sinner—but what significance would such words still hold for him?

Even if someone denied his crime, the one most caught up in this wrongdoing was not anyone else, but Lancelot himself.

Why had she been unaware of this lonely thought of his? Why had she been unable to release the noble spirit of this knight from a self-reproach that bordered on madness?

—A King will not understand someone else's feelings—

These words that she had heard as she left the Round Table—who had spoken them?

The knight's dead body did not say anything more; alongside the last remaining light, he vanished.

"—wait… wait… Lance—"

Staring at the crook of her arm that had lost its weight and was now empty, Saber began sobbing.

She could not even make a sound. She did not allow herself to make even the slightest sound. In the last moment that she had been facing a loyal knight, she had actually been unable to say even a word of reassurance—then what right had she to cry now?

A King can only be lonely and proud—

This she had said to herself; as she searched for the path to her kingdom's salvation, exactly how many people's opinions and troubles had she neglected?

Gawain who had heroically sacrificed himself, Galahad who had lost his life in the line of duty—what did they think of, in their last moment? Did they leave this world with the same regret and unwillingness? Why was she so certain that that was not true?

Saber cried soundlessly, tormented as if countless thorns were piercing her heart.

Could it be that she as a King should never have been high above—

If things had been thus, would it not have brought about a broken end? Could everyone be saved?

"... It isn't finished."

From her sobbing throat—that was the determined voice of a constantly victorious King.

"It can be compensated for… It's not too late… I still have the Grail. I still have the miracle that can overturn fate…"

Leaning upon the sword of victory, Saber stood up.

Even if she was unable to listen to the hearts of people, even if she was rebuked for being a proud and aloof King—none of that mattered at all.

Even thus, as long as she could win the victory for her homeland and her subjects with her own hands, it would be enough—this was what she asked of herself, what she must do as a 'King'.

As long as she could obtain the Grail, everything could be made up for; all the previous mistakes could be righted.

Now this belief was everything to Saber who had chosen the path of the King.

Covered with wounds, Saber stepped forward.

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The killing continued.

With bullets. With knives, with poisons, with explosives.

Piercing. Cutting apart. Burning. Drowning. Crushing.

He never doubted the meaning of it, not even once; he carefully conjectured the worth; the ones on the sunken side of the balance must be saved, and the other side must be emptied, so he killed. He kept killing, and killing, and killing.

Yes, that was correct. The many should be saved, and the sacrifices should be recognized. If the number of joys that were protected can go beyond the increasing number of misfortunes, then hasn't the world moved just a little closer to its salvation?

Even if innumerable corpses were accumulated at his feet.

As long as lives were saved. The ones that were protected were surely priceless.

"- That's right, Kiritsugu. You are correct."

Suddenly, he saw his wife at his side. With a smile filled with gentle kindness, she drew closer to him. Standing next to Kiritsugu, together on top of the mountain of corpses.

"I knew that you would come. I believed in you, knowing that you would arrive here eventually."

"Iri - "

It was a nostalgic and lovely face. Yet there was something that bothered him.

Was it the black dress that he had never seen before? There was that, too. However, he could not stop the feeling that he was overlooking something more important.

That's right; what happened to Saber? What happened to the remaining three teams of enemies? What happened to Kotomine Kirei? There were far too many questions. Which one should he start with?

Helplessly, Kiritsugu asked the question that came to his mind first.

"Where is - this?"

"This is the place where your wish is to be granted. This is the inside of the Grail you sought."

Irisviel answered with a welcoming smile. Kiritsugu was lost for words, and looked around him.

A pulsating sea of black mud.

Rotten corpses formed sunken mountains here and there.

The sky was crimson. Crimson like blood. In the descending rain of black mud, a jet-black Sun held up the Heavens.

The blowing winds were curses and resentment.

If one had to liken it to a word, then - how can this be anything but Hell?

"You're saying... this is the Holy Grail?"

"That's right. But you don't have to be afraid. This is still something like a shapeless dream. All it is waiting for is to be born."

Look, there - Irisviel pointed to the sky. At the center of this world, there was a swirl of deep black that he originally thought was a Sun, a "hole" that pierced the Heavens. A hole filled to the brim with a bottomless and heavy darkness. An incredible mass that seemed able to crush all.

"That is the Holy Grail. It has yet to obtain a shape, but the vessel has already been sufficiently filled. All that's needed is to announce the prayer. No matter what wish you may ask of it, it will choose to take a form most fitting to realize it. Then, once it obtains form and shape in the modern era, it will be able to go 'outside' for the first time."

"..."

"So please. Please hurry and give it a 'figure'. You are a human fit to define its nature. Kiritsugu, announce your wish to the Grail."

Kiritsugu wordlessly gazed at that repulsive "hole".

The thing that was there wasn't something that could possibly be tolerated by any human with proper sensibilities. So why was it that Irisviel can smile so calmly? Yes, more than everything, that smile felt out of place.

After all -

"...Who are you?"

Stifling his sense of dread with anger, Kiritsugu asked his wife who was standing before him.

"If the preparations of the Grail are in order, then Irisviel should already be lost to me. If that's the case, then just who are you?"

"I am Irisviel. There is no problem in thinking that."

The muzzle of the magecraft gun in Kiritsugu's right hand - the Contender that he had been grasping tightly the whole time since the battle with Kirei - was thrust at his opponent.

"Don't dodge the question. Answer me!"

Before the bloodthirsty muzzle, the woman in the black dress simply smiled with loneliness. As though she took pity on Kiritsugu for demanding such things.

"...True. I can't deny that this is a mask. If I don't put on an existing personality as a 'shell', we wouldn't be able to comprehend one another. I had to take this form in order to convey to you my desire.

But the personality of Irisviel which I recorded is unmistakably genuine. Just before she was extinguished, the last thing she touched was me. That is why I inherited Irisviel's last desire; because it is my duty to personify her wish to 'remain this way'."

With that confession, Kiritsugu understood, not as a theory but an instinct.

In this place that had been called the "inside of the Holy Grail", an existence which would call itself "someone who was no one" would be -

" - Are you, the will of the Holy Grail?"

"Yes, that interpretation is not incorrect."

The thing in the form of Irisviel nodded in approval. On the other hand, Kiritsugu further furrowed his brows in restless bewilderment.

"That's ridiculous. The Holy Grail can't be anything more than a colorless 'force'. There's no way it can have a will."

"That might have been so before. But it's different now. I have a will, and a desire. The will to 'be born into this world'."

"That can't be..."

Strange - something was strange.

If this was the truth, then this thing isn't the convenient "wishing machine" that Kiritsugu had sought.

" - If you have a will, then I'll ask you this. How does the Holy Grail plan to grant my desire?"

As though she was asked something incredibly strange, Irisviel tilted her head.

"That? - Isn't that something you, Kiritsugu, know better than anyone else?"

"...What did you say?"

"The nature of a human being like you is infinitely close to mine. That is why you can preserve your rationality even after being connected to me. The mind of a normal human would have collapsed the moment they are washed over by that mud."

Irisviel spoke, cheerfully, brightly, as though in celebration.

For some reason, that smile could not help but disturb Kiritsugu's heart.

"The way to save the world? Haven't you already understood that a long time ago? That is why I, as according to what you have built up, will inherit that nature, and achieve what you had prayed for."

"What are you - talking about?"

Kiritsugu could not understand. He did not want to understand, not even if he was mistaken.

"Answer me. What is the Holy Grail planning to do? What is it going to start if it descends onto the modern era?!"

At this exchange of endless disagreements, Irisviel sighed as though in resignation, and nodded.

" - It can't be helped. From now on, I will have to ask from inside yourself."

She held her white and graceful palm over Kiritsugu's eyes -

And the world blacked out.

Two ships floated on the ocean.

One ship had three hundred people. The other had two hundred people. There were five hundred crew members and passengers in total, as well as Emiya Kiritsugu. For

the sake of argument, these five hundred and one are set up as the last survivors of the human race.

Now, Emiya Kiritsugu shall take charge of this role-play, and address the following propositions.

Critically-large holes have opened up in the bilges of both ships at the same time. Only Kiritsugu possesses the skill to repair the ships. In the time it takes to repair one ship, the other will sink. Now then, which ship will you fix?

"...The one with three hundred aboard, of course."

After you make that decision, the two hundred aboard the other ship capture you and make this demand. "Fix this ship first". Now then, what will you do?

"I..."

Before he could speak his reply, the Calico sub-machine gun appeared in Kiritsugu's hand.

Flames savagely spouted from its muzzle, as though the machine could act automatically; Kiritsugu watched over it, dumbfounded.

A single bullet spat out perforated four people, and in an instant, all two hundred people were massacred.

- Correct. That is what's expected from Emiya Kiritsugu.

Kiritsugu watched in a daze as the ship with a mountain of stacked corpses sunk. He got the feeling that every one of the corpses scattered on the deck had faces that he recognized.

Now then, the surviving three hundred people abandon the damaged ship, split onto two new ships, and continue their voyage. This time, one ship has two hundred people, the other has one hundred people. And yet once again, holes open up in the bilges of both ships at the same time.

"Hold it..."

The one hundred aboard the smaller ship abduct you, and coerce you to fix this ship first. Now then, what will you do?

"But... that's..."

With the flash of a naked sword, a bomb burst, and one hundred people disappeared into watery graves. That was the way of Emiya Kiritsugu. As according to what he in the past had built up, he had accomplished the slaughter.

- Correct.

"That's... that's ridiculous!"

What had been correct about this?

Two hundred people survived. Three hundred people died for them - that was the complete opposite of the scales' balance needle.

No, the calculation was not incorrect. You certainly chose the save the many and sacrifice the few. Now then, on to the next quest.

Indifferent to Kiritsugu's protests, the Game Master continued.

One hundred twenty and eighty were balanced on the scales. Kiritsugu killed every single one of the eighty.

Next, it was eighty and forty. The Magus Killer ascertained the death throes of the forty. He remembered every face. They were the ones who had been killed by his hands in the past.

Sixty and twenty -

Twenty-five and fifteen - the choices continued. The sacrifices continued. The mountain of corpses accumulated.

"This... is what you wanted to show me?"

Even as Kiritsugu recalled his nausea at the aim of this vile game, he listened intently to the thing that called itself the "will of the Holy Grail".

That's right. This is your truth. The answer within Emiya Kiritsugu. In other words, the acts that should be carried out by the Holy Grail as a wishing machine.

"No!"

Kiritsugu shouted, with his hands stained by blood.

"I didn't wish for something like this! I wanted some other method... that's why I had no choice but to rely on a **miracle**..."

A method you yourself are not aware of could not possibly be included into your desire. You wished for the salvation of the world; therefore, it can only be realized by the means you are aware of.

"To hell with that! How is... this a miracle?!"

It is a miracle. What you had once aspired for, the deed that you were unable to achieve alone will finally be carried out on a scope unreachable by the hands of men. This is nothing if not a miracle.

Five remained. They were all valuable to Kiritsugu. However, he was pressed to choose either the three or the two.

Whimpering in despair, he pulled the trigger. The face of Emiya Noritaka was blown away. The gray matter of Natalia Kaminsky was scattered.

"You... you're going to descend onto the modern era, and do... this to the entire human race? This is the realization of my ideal?!"

That's right. Your desire is a suitable form for the Holy Grail. Emiya Kiritsugu, you truly are suited to bear Angra Mainyu.

Three remained. Will he save the two, or choose the one? He grasped the grip of his knife with shaking hands.

He had already run dry of tears; with empty eyes like those of a ghost, Kiritsugu tore apart the body of Hisau Maiya. Again and again, he swung the knife down.

And now, there were only two who survived in the world.

Two equal values which did not need to be weighed on the scales, which could not be measured. The last hope that he protected to the end, exchanged with the lives of four hundred and ninty-eight people.

Everything having been accomplished, Kiritsugu, dazed and husk-like, was embraced by the warmth of a hearth.

In a nostalgic, gentle, warm room, smiles bounced between the faces of his "wife" and "daughter".

In other words, this - is the world of tranquility which he had sought.

There would be no more conflicts, no one will have to be hurt; a perfected utopia.

"Welcome home, Kiritsugu. You're finally back!"

Shining with a face full of joy, Ilyasviel swung her small arms around her father's neck.

The castle enclosed by clouds in the uttermost north; this was the only place of tranquility.

At the end of a bloodstained life, he found a kindness which shouldn't even exist.

If this modest child's room was by itself the entirety of the world, then there would no longer be a need for discord.

" - See? You understand, don't you? This is the Holy Grail's realization of your prayer."

Sharing this moment of utter bliss with her husband, Irisviel smiled.

All that was needed, was to pray for it.

His wife can be awakened. His daughter can be brought back.

Before an amount of prana as good as infinite, it would be a simple miracle.

The only thing left was bliss. As the last remnant of humanity on this planet of death where everything had perished, the family of three can continue to live together in eternal happiness.

"...We, can't go looking for walnuts anymore..."

There was not even a snowy landscape outside the window, but simply a swirling back mud, like the bottom of the sea. At Kiritsugu's absentminded murmur, Ilyasviel shook her head.

"No, it's all right. I'll be fine as long as Kiritsugu and Mother are together with me."

Petting and hugging the head of the daughter he frantically loved, Kiritsugu cried out surging tears.

"Thank you... Daddy loves you too, Ilya. I swear, if nothing else, that that's true..."

Only the hands had moved without faltering. As though they had been mechanically structured that way. Beneath the small chin of his beloved daughter pressed the muzzle of the Contender.

"- Goodbye, Ilya."

The head of the puzzlingly staring little girl exploded with the sound of a gunshot.

On Kiritsugu's tear-stained cheeks landed a piece of meat entangled with silver hair.

Irisviel screamed. Tearing at her eyes, tossing her hair wildly, she cried out in fury, without control.

"Wha - what did you do - ?!"

His wife came reaching out to him with the face of a devil, but it was Kiritsugu who pressed down on her instead, entwining his fingers around that small throat.

"The Holy Grail is something that can't exist..."

No matter "what" was inside this woman, the personality of Irisviel it wore as a shell was real. The despair and lamentation of her daughter's murder; the hatred for the husband who killed her own child; they were unmistakably what the real Irisviel would have bore, her genuine emotions.

Staring at it, accepting it, Kiritsugu put all his strength into his two hands, and squeezed down on the neck of his wife.

"What are, you... why did you, reject the Grail, reject us... my Ilya... no, why?!"

"- Because, I -"

The voice that leaked out from his mouth was simply empty, like a wind blowing in through a crevice from a hollow cave. There was no sorrow. There was no anger. It was obvious. There was no longer anything inside Emiya Kiritsugu. He turned his back on the miracle he had pursued, and relinquished even the compensation for that betrayal. It was impossible for there to be anything inside him now.

"I - will save the world."

The only thing left, persisting to the very end, was the words of his belief. How hollow those ringing words were.

Irisviel stared at Kiritsugu as blood congested on her white face. The crimson eyes that would always look at him with nothing but affection and admiration were now painted by bottomless curses and resentment.

"- curse you -"

The five small fingers that had been so graceful grabbed onto Kiritsugu's shoulder. From the five fingers biting into him flowed in a black mud.

"Curse you... Emiya Kiritsugu... to pain... to regret until death... I will never, forgive you..."

"Yeah, that's fine."

The mud dyed in hatred circulated in his veins, flowing into his heart. It drenched the soul of the man who lost everything. Even so, Kiritsugu did not slacken his hands. Forgetting even the meaning of the tears along his cheeks, strangling the woman in the black dress, he told her.

"That's all right. It's already been said - I, will bear you."

Within his shaking hands, the woman's spine snapped and broke.

And once again, the landscape was altered.

- As the dream that had deeply violated his heart ended, it seemed to have lasted only for an instant.

Before he realized it, Kiritsugu was standing back in the stage warehouse.

In his right hand was the Contender with its firing hammer still raised. Kotomine Kirei was before his eyes, having fallen unconscious while still kneeling.

Kiritsugu looked up to the ceiling and gazed at the black mud that was still dripping down all around him, charring the floor. Probably, it was that both Kiritsugu and, at the same time, Kirei, were washed over by the mud. It was very likely that their eyes saw the same thing.

If that mud was the content pouring out from the Holy Grail - then the vessel had undoubtedly continued the ritual of advent the entire time, on top of the Concert Hall stage on the floor above them.

He needed to hurry.

Kirei regained his consciousness, tried to stand, and was hindered by the muzzle of Kiritsugu's gun pressing on his back.

Immediately understanding the situation, a bitter laugh slipped out from Kirei's mouth at the ironic circumstances. They had been in such a hard-fought, life-and-death struggle; and in the end, what had decided the outcome was nothing more than simply who happened to awaken first by chance.

Or perhaps - it was logical that the one who ended the nightmare with his own will, would be the first to awaken.

"...You are such a fool that I can't understand it. Why did you reject it?"

It was a restrained voice, hiding his anger and hatred. For the first time, Emiya Kiritsugu heard Kotomine Kirei's voice directly.

"...Did that thing look agreeable to you?"

It was a dry and hoarse voice, so worn down it sounded hollow. For the first time, Kotomine Kirei heard Emiya Kiritsugu's voice directly.

They had both touched the thing that was submerged in the Holy Grail and understood its true form. Kiritsugu and the will of the Holy Grail had understood one another; Kirei saw that with his own eyes. And Kiritsugu's choice was, to Kirei, far beyond comprehension or tolerance.

"You... you must have arrived at this place by throwing it all away, sacrificing everything! It's something that you had to do all that to obtain - how can you just make it worthless now?!"

"The things that must be sacrificed for it are more severe than the things it can bring about - that's all there is to it."

"In that case, yield it to me!"

It was then that Kirei drew out the hatred from the bottom of his heart for Emiya Kiritsugu - for the man who he had once thought might bear a resemblance to himself, but who now was so very much his utter opposite.

"Even if it's unnecessary to you, I have a use for it! With *that*... if that thing is born, it can definitely bring an answer to all my doubts!"

Kirei knew of Kiritsugu's intentions. He understood what this man, who had been so resolute in rejecting the wishing machine that he laid his hands on even his most beloved, would do next. And that, was something he cannot possibly forgive. All of Kotomine Kirei's wanderings up until this day were being put on the line.

"Just don't kill it! *It* wishes for its own life, to be born!"

Forbidden from even turning around, the priest implored intensely; the assassin looked down at him with an icy gaze.

"Yeah, and you - you're just too much of a fool to understand."

His finger slipped onto the trigger, squeezing it, and the firing hammer punched into the primer of the .30-06 Springfield bullet.

Gunfire and a thunderous roar flashed for an instant.

With a single faultless round, Kiritsugu shot out from behind the heart of Kotomine Kirei.

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Saber walked through the flames that burned like purgatory.

The wounds that Berserker had inflicted on her were beyond that which could be cured by her regenerative abilities. The once shining platinum armor was also stained black in places by Berserker's countless attacks. Her bloodless skin was white as paper. Her knees were weak, her ankles trembled, her breathing was rapid; with every step, pain wracked her entire body, almost making her lose consciousness.

Even though every step was difficult, Saber nevertheless did not stop walking forward.

She still bore the responsibility, bore the promise that she as a King must fulfill. There was only one way left to fulfill this promise, and that was to obtain the Grail. Therefore it was necessary that she go on; spurring on her wounded body, she gritted her teeth and walked forward.

At last, she reached the first floor. Passing through the entrance, she pushed open the main doors; an empty music hall appeared before her eyes. In the middle of the stage in front of her, the Grail floated encircled by flames, shining with eye-catching golden light.

"Ah…"

It was clear at a glance; this was undoubtedly the Grail that she desired so much to obtain.

The flesh body of the homunculus had reverted to the gold vessel that was forged from inorganic material. Saber did not know the process by which this was done, but she could tell, from the scene before her, exactly what had happened.

She was 'the Guardian of the Vessel', and had been determined to pass the Grail to Kiritsugu and Saber. If there was a possibility that the 'Vessel' could be stolen, then before that happened, she would definitely come forward to defend the Grail unto the death. Now, the ritual setting was missing Irisviel's form; controlled by an invisible hand, the Grail was about to descend.

"Irisviel…"

Remembering her voice and her smile, Saber bit her lip with a sob.

She had sworn on her sword to protect her, but had been unable to do so. She had reneged on her vow.

Just like she had been unable to save her beloved home country.

Just like she had been unable to resolve the torment of a friend.

Self-reproach and humiliation tore at her heart. Flashing in her mind was the city eternally covered by falling snow, and the words of Irisviel as they had exchanged vows.

—Saber, you must get the Grail. For you, and your Master—

"...Yes, at least this promise I will keep. Only this promise…”

—was supporting everything of Saber now.

In this moment she still held the precious sword in her hand; she still breathed, her heart still beat. All this, for one reason.

Saber stepped forward resolutely. Exactly at this time—

"Too slow, Saber. Even if you were bitten by that domesticated mad dog, you shouldn’t have let me wait this long.”

A devastating golden form was standing in the middle of the aisle in the spectator stand, blocking Saber’s way.

"...Archer…”

“Heh heh, don’t make that expression. I know you’re envious of my riches, but do show more restraint. That undisguised expression is really tasteless. Like a dog that has gone hungry for too long.”

The enemy’s appearance did not come unexpectedly to Saber.

This municipal hall was the final gathering place for all the Servants that still remained. Even if the other enemies initiated attacks on each other, it would be too naïve to hope that they would perish together. There was still one battle left, and the adversary was undoubtedly one of Archer or Rider.

But—Archer’s intact armor and his leisurely presence, infused with prana, made Saber grit her teeth.

Undoubtedly, not a hair of this golden Servant had come to harm. Beyond unharmed, it could even be said that he was running at full capacity.

Saber had been seriously injured in the battle with Berserker. If she wished to defeat Archer, she could only pin her hopes on her opponent having been drained considerably in a battle with Rider. But at this moment, not even a single scratch from battle could be seen on Archer.

Unexpectedly, the King of Conquerors had been unable to exact his revenge for that one sword blow…Was this Servant, whose identity was still unknown, really so strong?

Now, even the last thread of hope had been ground out of existence, but in Saber's heart still flared a flame of anger.

Chances of victory, or tactics—None of that mattered any more. Saber only thought it unforgivable—she could not forgive that even now, there was still someone who stood between her and the Grail.

"...You, get out of the way…"

Saber's low voice was filled with hatred. The insane obsession caused her once clear jade eyes to fill with a murky yellow-brown.

"The Grail… is mine… !"

The many wounds on Saber's body could not stop her; roaring, she swung her sword at Archer. But after having made only a single step, her left leg was immediately pierced through by a Noble Phantasm that shot out of the air.

Saber fell to the floor, but gritted her teeth to prevent herself from groaning. Looking around, she saw groups of weapons from the Gate of Babylon continually appear in midair, all directed toward her, ready to be launched at any time.

As soon as their owner gave the order, countless primeval Noble Phantasms would shoot in unison toward Saber. She had literally become the target of a thousand arrows (3). As her left leg had been previously pierced through, she could not even dodge.

"Saber… this sight of you crouched on the ground, fallen into this presumptuous obsession, makes you even more beautiful…

Archer’s blood-red eyes held an uncomfortable emotion as he looked at Saber, who despite being mired in a hopeless situation, was still intending to make a final struggle.

"I don’t know why you are so obsessed with some wish-granting Grail. Saber… the fact that a woman like you exists can already be considered a rare miracle, no?”

Archer’s tone was unnaturally calm, as if it was not a dangerous enemy that was before him. This calm made the cornered Saber suspicious.

"What… are you saying—“

"Throw away your sword, and be my wife.”

In this situation, in this circumstance, Archer’s words surprised Saber. She was stunned by the sheer unexpectedness of it.

"... Wh—what did you say… What are you going to do!?”

“Even if you don’t understand, don’t you feel happy to hear such words? It is not anyone else, but I, who have admitted your worth.”

Perhaps only Archer alone would think that such a conclusion was a matter of course. The golden Servant arrogantly lifted his head, looking before him at the first woman he had ever loved.

"Abandon these pointless ideals and vows. These things will only restrict you and bring you misfortune. In future you need only desire me and live under my protection. In that case I vow, on my honor as King of everything, that I will grant you all the happiness in the world.”

"..."

His presumptuous tone was enough to re-ignite the flame of anger in Saber’s conflicted heart.

"For this ridiculous motive… you are fighting with me for the Grail?

A second Noble Phantasm exploded as it flew past Saber’s nose. The force of the impact blew Saber into the air.

"I am not asking your opinion, but informing you of my decision.”

Archer’s face showed a bloodthirsty joy, as if relishing the sight of Saber’s furious resistance.

So this proud Heroic Spirit had never seen his opponent as a competitor of equal standing with himself. The enemy was worthy only of being manipulated and humiliated; he liked to admire the sight of their surrender to him. Saber's desperate retaliation, on which she had gambled her all, to Archer was only an ordinary entertainment.

"All right, let's have your response. Although the answer is right in front of you, I am very curious as to what expression you will wear as you say these words yourself."

"I refuse! I will never—"

Without waiting for her to finish, Archer's lightning-fast Noble Phantasm once again pierced into Saber's already injured left leg. Hearing Saber's groans of intense pain, Archer could not but laugh loudly.

"You can't say it because you are too shy? It's all right; I'll forgive you no matter how many times you get it wrong. First you must learn suffering, and then you will be able to experience the joy I give you."

The Noble Phantasms floating in midair waved their sharp blades as if to intimidate, gradually pressing closer to Saber.

An uncontrollable anger roiled in Saber's thoughts. Compared to being killed in humiliation it would be better to try to get back at the enemy, even if it meant her life.

There was no other way. If she concentrated all the strength left in her body, perhaps she could still eke out the prana needed for one last strike of Excalibur. It would not be surprising if a Heroic Spirit of such unfathomable ability could defend against the attack of an anti-fortress Noble Phantasm, but at this moment he completely believed that he would win, and that made him complacent; he had never thought that Saber would still retaliate.

And yet—if Saber launched a counterattack on Archer from this position, the impact would wreck the Grail on the stage. Even if Archer took the full impact and was reduced to charcoal, the Grail would also be inevitably destroyed. In that case, all her efforts would have come to nothing.

"What should I do…!"

Facing this difficult choice, Saber sank into a dilemma; at this time, she noticed that a third figure had appeared in the hall.

On the wall that was approximately two floors high, within the semicircle-shaped box that did not protrude outward. In the light from the fire, appeared a ghostlike silhouette wearing a long windbreaker. He was the true Master who had made the contract with Saber—Emiya Kiritsugu.

From within the hopelessness, appeared a ray of sunlight.

Kiritsugu still held the forceful commanding power of the Command Seals. If he could lend her this magecraft power that he possessed, that had the ability to make the impossible possible, perhaps she would be able to break this stalemate.

As long as Kiritsugu understood Saber's current situation, it was almost certain that he would use the Command Seals. Fortunately, Archer had not yet realized Kiritsugu's presence.

Kiritsugu raised his right hand, showing the Command Seals carved on the back.

It was completely up to Kiritsugu what kind of order he would give. But Saber had already made up her mind that no matter how strange the battle tactics he intended to employ, she would do her utmost to carry them out. As long as she could retaliate against Archer, any methods would be fine.

Even if his command was to block the sense of pain and use all her strength, Saber would ignore the pain of her physical body, and exert the greatest strength from within her body until there was nothing left. If he commanded her to undergo instantaneous movement to the side of the Grail, then she would be able to escape this extremely disadvantageous position. Perhaps through precise calibration of Excalibur, she would be able to bring Archer down without harming the Grail. Such is a Command Seal. If the Command Seals were used with the consent of both Master and Servant, then no matter how impossible the task, it could be completed. In this moment, Saber entrusted everything to this last hope, because only it could turn the tables astonishingly on the current situation.

—Emiya Kiritsugu uses the Command Seal to command Saber—

The low words shook her entire body from the depths of her soul. The voice that could not have been more familiar announced, clearly and decisively.

—Use your Noble Phantasm, and destroy the Grail—

How the significance behind these words should be explained, how she should understand them—Saber's mind went momentarily blank.

"...wh…?"

The rising hurricane dispelled the surrounding flames. From the heart of the deactivated Invisible Air, the form of the golden sword appeared.

Even if Saber's brain refused to understand, her physical Servant's body loyally accepted the command of the Command Seal. The precious sword began to accumulate light, completely independently of its bearer's intention.

"Wh—what is this—What do you want to do!?"

Even Archer was stunned speechless. He had thought that because he had his back to the Grail, Saber would never execute a counterattack on him.

"...N… no!"

Saber roared in anger; that was a scream into which she had put all her strength. The golden sword raised high suddenly halted in midair.

As the legendary King of Knights, and as a Servant of the most excellent class, the the outstanding Magic Resistance ability that Saber possessed could actually resist the restraint of the Command Seals, albeit just barely. She used all her strength to halt her action of bringing her sword down. The opposing forces of compulsion and resistance clashed intensely within Saber's body; her slender form seemed as if it would be torn apart at any time.

This intense pain and unimaginable torment made Saber remember the last moments of Diarmuid Ua Duibhne. Now she experienced utterly for herself the bitterness and humiliation that the tragic Heroic Spirit had undergone.

At the same time that she opposed the strong magecraft, Saber stared at Kiritsugu who stood in the middle of the box, and shouted.

"Why?! Kiritsugu—Why did it have to be you!?"

Impossible. It was impossible that he had given this order.

Kiritsugu desired so much to obtain the Grail—then in this moment, why did he reject it? Did he want to let the ritual, that his wife had given her life to bring about, go to waste?

After realizing that Saber's unnatural actions were the doing of the Command Seal, Archer finally realized Emiya Kiritsugu's presence.

"Are you trying to ruin my wedding, mongrel?!"

The Noble Phantasms that had been aimed at Saber now suddenly turned in unison to target Kiritsugu's box.

But without waiting for the Noble Phantasms to begin their attack, Kiritsugu again raised his right hand to show the back to Saber below him—there was still one last Command Seal carved there.

—I use the third Command Seal to command again—

"Stop!!!"

Seeing that her pride and hope were about to disintegrate into ashes in the blink of an eye, Saber shrieked out in tears.

—Saber, destroy the Grail—

That was an ultimate might that could not be resisted at all.

The tremendous force of the dual Command Seals ravaged and crushed Saber's form, at the same time drawing out all the prana that still remained within her body, weaving it into the light of destruction.

The released beam of light made a cross-section of the entire hall, directly impacting the Grail that floated on the stage. Archer nimbly dodged this attack, but because he was in close proximity to the beam of light, its high intensity made him momentarily unable to execute the attack on Kiritsugu.

In the heat of the lightning, the golden Grail that had once been a part of Irisviel's body now quietly lost its shape, then vanished. Saber closed her eyes, not daring to

look directly at this sight—now the last hope had been destroyed. Her fight had ended.

Since things were thus, how could she look upon this tragic scene with open eyes?

In truth, she never did open her eyes again. The Noble Phantasm, that had been forcibly executed in opposition to her own intentions, had already consumed all Saber's remaining prana; she could not even maintain her physical Servant form any more. Saber had lost the strength and the will to remain in this world. Of course, this was also because her Master, who was also part of the contract, did not intend to let her stay.

Maintaining her stance of bringing her sword down, Saber started to leave this world; soon, her physical body also vanished.

In the moment in which she gradually lost contact with the real world, the riddle of this character Kiritsugu was the last consideration that flashed in Saber's mind.

The adoring father that doted on his daughter, the warrior that hoped to save the world, the killer that had lost all hope in justice; it was various conflicting pieces of humanity that he showed, but in the end he had betrayed everything, denied everything.

Until the end, Saber could be sure only of the callousness and ruthlessness of this man's heart.

Until the end, he and she had never been able to understand each other and build up a relationship of trust—no, perhaps it should be said that only at the final moment had she realized that she had never understood his true thoughts.

And yet, that was also not altogether unjustifiable—

Within her gradually vanishing awareness, Saber mocked herself.

How was she to understand this man who had not crossed paths with her beyond having given her three orders? She had once been unable to understand even the hearts of those at her side.

Perhaps all of this was the long and euphemistic punishment that tormented the 'King who did not understand others' hearts'.

Even though Saber left the world carrying many injuries, without having realized the burden in her heart, perhaps not having to personally witness the tragedy that came after was also a sort of recompense to her.

The beam of light from Excalibur that had destroyed the Grail had blown away the ceiling of the stage, and sheared the entire municipal hall into two. The building, that had already been burned beyond recognition, could not withstand the blow. The structure of the upper levels had been destroyed; the roof, having lost its support, now dropped into the hall like an avalanche.

Following which, through the fragments of debris, Kiritsugu saw ‘it’ in the revealed night sky.

A black sun — that which he had seen when he had touched the black mud. The sign of the end of the world.

At that time Kiritsugu had not seen clearly that its physical form was actually a true ‘hole’. It is a space tunnel that connected with the Magic Circle of the Greater Grail, which had been hidden beneath the altar of the ritual of descent, deep underground in Mount Enzō to the east of Miyama. The insides of the Greater Grail, which had drawn energy from the leylines for sixty years and now had obtained the souls of six Heroic Spirits, had been filled to the brim and turned into an enormous prana whirlpool. That was the true form of that black ‘hole’.

The ‘Vessel’ that had been removed from the Einsberns’ homunculus was only the key to open that ‘hole’, and also the control that sustained the stability of the hole. Kiritsugu, who did not know anything about this secret, had made a fatal mistake; he should not have commanded Saber to destroy the Grail, but instead should have made her use Excalibur to burn down the hole in the sky. No longer controlled by the ‘vessel’, the black sun began to melt; the hole gradually shrunk, but before it closed completely, it was already completely impossible to prevent the black mud from flowing out from within the hole.

That was a neutral energy that had been used only to create an opening to the ‘outside world’, but due to Kiritsugu’s previous mistake, it was stained with the pitch-black color of the curse.

This cursed mud that was full of ‘Angra Mainyu • All the Evil in the World'. The destructive power could burn away all the life in the world—at this moment it descended like a great waterfall from above the Municipal Hall.

Archer, standing in the spectator stands on the first floor, could not find a way of retreat to escape this baptism.

"This… this is…!?”

The turbulent black waves carried away the helpless golden Servant. No, he was not simply carried away; the moment he had touched the black mud, he had vanished. Archer's body had been broken down and absorbed by the black mud in the blink of an eye; he had become one with the tempestuous flow of mud.

The black mud consumed the first-floor spectator stand like a tsunami; Kiritsugu, who was standing in the box and had thus escaped misfortune, stared blankly at all this. The cursed waterfall that descended from midair did not show any signs of stopping; the black mud became a river as it passed through the entrance of the municipal hall, flowing out of the building and spreading out toward the surrounding districts.

Thus, the massacre began.

The people were all sleeping soundly; the mud of death sensed the presence of human life, and became a burning curse that attacked at their pillowside.

It burned the houses, burned the courtyards. No matter if they slept, or woke and tried to escape, all the people burned without exception—that which had waited within the Grail for sixty years now mercilessly seized all the life it touched, as if celebrating its fleeting freedom.

After the event it was found that there were more than 500 casualties, and 134 buildings had burned down. This great calamity of unknown cause left a mark in the hearts of the citizens of Fuyuki that was difficult to erase.

After a while, the hole in the sky disappeared, and the black mud no longer poured forth. But the mud had brought a fire of enormous proportions; the people who had been unable to escape turned one by one into burnt black corpses. A magnificent red lotus of fire bloomed in the night sky; on the ground was staged an endless banquet of death.

Having escaped the gradually collapsing municipal hall, Emiya Kiritsugu personally witnessed the entire process.

The life that tended toward destruction—was so much like the scene that had tormented him in nightmares. But that before him now was undoubtedly real.

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She dreamed a dream, and in the dream, the world was burning.

The young girl, wrapped in a duvet and trembling from fear, opened her eyes.

The bedroom, guarded by the warm firelight from the fireplace, was still as calm and peaceful as before. The chilly night outside the window could not be of any threat to the girl who lay on the bed.

Even through the thick glass, she could hear the howling of the icy wind outside the window; the wind crept quietly into the house through the gap between the window and the frame. It was surely this sound that made her think mistakenly that she heard the tormented cries of people as they burned and died.

— What's wrong, Illyasviel?—

This her mother spoke, gently caressing her face. Her mother's voice and touch, which stayed at all times by the girl's side, at once set her heart to rest.

The girl and her mother were both existences that had been designed in the image of the magus who was called the 'Lady of Winter'. Thus, in the girl's heart there was her mother, and her aunt. Even if one were to pursue all the way to the very earliest 'Primeval Justizia', it was recorded in the girl's heart.

Thus, even if it was a night during which she was alone, sleeping soundly wrapped in a duvet, the girl would never be lonely. She need only call out, and she could hear her mother's voice any time, see her mother's form any time.

"Mommy… I had a scary dream. In the dream, Illya became a cup."

Gazing relieved at her mother's soft silver hair and gentle eyes, the girl continued to recount her nightmare.

"Seven very, very big things were put into Illya. Illya almost broke, she was scared but also could not run away… then I heard Justizia's voice, and above my head appeared a big black hole… then, the world started to burn. Kiritsugu looked at the world, and cried."

Yes, she dreamed of him too. The father that she had heard say was in a faraway foreign land, dealing with some troublesome work.

Having thought of this, the girl suddenly realized that her nightmare just now seemed to represent something bad; she became uneasy again.

"Mommy… Kiritsugu will be okay, right? He won't be alone and scared?"

Looking at the girl worried for her father, the mother smiled gently.

– It's okay. That person will definitely strive, for Illya's sake. So that Illya will not have that sort of scary memories again, he will definitely realize his dream, for us —

"...Nn, that's right, that's right."

She knows that that person is one who has a strong desire to win. So, once he has finished that important work, he will definitely come back here immediately. The girl spread her fingers, counting the days till that day came. Though it was cold sleeping alone, even thus, her mother was still by her side. She wouldn't be lonely—until the day she could correctly understand this contradiction.

The girl waited from within the city eternally sealed within falling snow. The promise that she had exchanged with her father, was the treasure that she valued the most.

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The sky at sunset was the color of blood.

The ground before her eyes was also the color of blood.

The corpses slumped on the ground were the people who had once believed in a young girl and supported her as King, offering up to her the songs of victory.

Due to traitors sowing discord, they had divided into two factions; each had seen the other as an enemy and carried out slaughter, and then, they had fallen together on this battlefield. King Arthur's final resting place, the foot of Camlann Hill.

Waking from a dream of the other side of space and time, kneeling dejectedly once more atop the bloodstained hill, Arturia blankly gazed at the desolate scene.

In order to change this ending, she had entrusted her soul after death to the 'World'; and started a journey in search of a miracle.

She had initially decided not to return here; she had initially believed that she would never see this scene again. But at this moment, the young girl still knelt on this piece of land.

But this was not the ending. This was only one point on the endlessly cyclic path.

After being released from her contract, the Heroic Spirit named Arturia had not set forth for the ‘Throne of Heroes’, but had been brought back to this place Camlann, because she had not come to the end of her fate’s path; It was necessary that she meets her final end here.

In other words, before she had been summoned to be a Servant, she was not a standard Heroic Spirit who had become one after dying in reality.

At the last moment she had exchanged vows with the ‘World’, hoping to obtain the Grail, and the price was to turn her soul after death into a guardian—this was the truth about the Servant named Arturia.

The contract could only be fulfilled only under the condition that the Grail had been obtained. In other words, if Arturia did not obtain the Grail, then time would forever stop on this land; forever, where even death cannot be achieved. Before obtaining the Grail, she could only continue to participate in the fight for the Grail on the other side of time.

Therefore, Arturia’s time had been frozen in the moment before her death. Unless she obtained the Grail, she could only return again and again to Camlann. Over and over again, this scene would eternally reproach her, torment her.

On the slope of death, she still held the stance with which she had established the contract.

Her face covered with tears, gauntlets stained through with the blood of enemies, the lance in her hand piercing the heart of her own flesh and blood.

The traitor who had also inherited her own bloodline, the child of tragedy, Mordred. The entanglement of love and hate had caused her to lose everything, and the scene to be fixed at the instant when she killed her own flesh and blood with her own hands—

The instant in which the awareness of the ‘World’ had come, summoned by wretched and tormented cries, and established the contract with the hero who searched for a miracle—

This was the prison that forever bound Arturia, who had lost her time.

Within time that had lost its meaning, within an instant that was equivalent to eternity, she gazed upon the battlefield under the light of dusk, and waited for the next summoning.

She was always right; this she firmly believed in. Even thus, she had still overlooked the spark that had caused the tragedy before her eyes, just like she had overlooked Lancelot and Guinevere's pain.

She could not figure it out, and she did not understand why she could not figure it out—this was the limit of the king Arturia.

In that case, could it be that the terrible scene on Camlann was not any trick of fate, but the necessary result of the king Arturia's rule?

"Uu…"

Unable to stop herself, she began to sob.

She remembered those long and distant days. She remembered the girl who had never paid attention to the men as they contested each other in the noisy arena, and had instead faced, alone, the sword stuck in the stone.

At that time, what had she been thinking of?

With what kind of resolution had she extended her arm to grip the hilt?

The memories had long since blurred; even though the tears obscured her sight, she could not remember.

In that case—her mistake must have been made that day.

She let the tears run freely down her face. In this place where time did not run, no matter what she thought or what she did, it would not be recorded in history. Here, she did not need to place on herself the title of King. In that case, it mattered not if she showed weakness; it mattered not if she showed shame.

With these thoughts, she faced the ideals that had not been fulfilled; she faced the people who had not been saved.

She faced everything that had vanished because she was king.

"... Sorry…"

Though she was choked to the point where she almost could not speak, she still could not control the impulse to apologize. Though she understood that her apology could not be conveyed to anyone’s heart, the girl nevertheless repeated her regret.

"I’m sorry… sorry… I, someone like me…”

One day, after stepping over endless battles, she would finally obtain the Grail. A that time, all the mistakes that she had made, could be erased through a miracle.

As she was now—she should not be called a king.

Before the next time she was summoned, the girl would always— within the instant that was called forever, within the censure that was called eternal rest—weep and regret.

Enduring torment in eternal punishment. Feeling cowardice toward sins that could not be repaid.

-03:11:56

— A vortex started up.

Sin, the evil in this world, circulated and multiplied and chained and changed as it whirled into a vortex.

Gluttony lust greed depression wrath sloth hypocrisy pride envy, over and over again encroaching and sprouting, whirling into the vortex.

The crime of rebellion the crime of intimidation the crime of adultery the crime of destruction the seven cardinal sins the crime of coercion the crime of theft the crime of desertion the crime of slander the crime of arson the crime of insulting the crime of disrespect the crime of sowing discord the crime of abduction the crime of bribery the crime of abortion the crime of assisting suicide the crime of gambling the crime of abandoning a corpse the crime of mobbing the crime of abandonment the crime of bearing false witness the crime of possessing stolen goods the crime of kidnapping the crime of violence, all crimes should be assessed and sentenced to capital punishment or severe punishment refuse and deny all hatred kill kill kill it is absolutely forbidden kill kill kill he will absolutely not agree kill kill kill very good just like that kill kill kill right that's right kill kill kill promise kill kill kill but no but no what kill kill kill ah it is really boring to have only this one thought——

"——!?"

The vortex of sound that was the curse was circling. There existed something here that should not exist; from within the barrage of denying curses, a voice cried out, 'yes!"

Impossible. Affirmations and correctness did not exist within this cursed vortex of hatred. Because everything had determined that everything was ugly and hateful so this word could not appear here—

—But that voice announced again clearly, 'that is right.'

That is right. The world was originally already like this. Since the truth has been put before your eyes, then why do you sigh? Why are you surprised?

"——!?"

The voice of the curse asked.

What was right?

Who was there to acknowledge it? Who was there to permit it? And who was to bear the burden of sin?

Facing the bombshell tossed from the darkness— in reply, a resounding and concrete sneer.

A foolish question. That goes without asking.

The King will acknowledge it; the King will permit it. The King will bear the burden of the entire world.

"——!?"

The mud asked, what is a king?

But at the same time that it asked the question, it realized that it had contradicted itself.

In this place that strictly did not allow the existence of ‘entities’, the mud had admitted that there was someone else within it. Some strange foreign object, that could not exist, had appeared here.

That was — King — a presence that was an absolute controller, as well as one that had no equal.

His name was — King of Heroes, Gilgamesh.

"That’s me!”

Along with flying droplets, the black mud cracked and dispersed away. The foreign object that it could not digest even with having mobilized all its hatred appeared from within the black mud.

Within the burning ruins, he once again stood upon the ground.

The perfect, Golden-proportioned body was no longer the spirit form that it had taken during its time as a Servant, but a true flesh body. The black mud that denied all life crystallized the impurity within itself and then abandoned it, but the result had been that a certain Heroic Spirit had realized his wish of obtaining a corporeal body and returning to this world.

Even standing in the exact middle of a burning hell, the majesty emanating from the body of the king made the surrounding flames afraid to come close. Gilgamesh generously bared his naked body that was like a statue, at the same time sneering impatiently.

"—People would actually treat that sort of thing as a wish-granting machine and fight to the death for it. This time, the entertainment has really been frustrating."

But it was not bad like this either—touching the new flesh body that he had accidentally received, the King of Heroes felt immensely satisfied.

"Is it Heaven's will that lets me descend like a sovereign upon this time to unite the world again … Humph, the previous tribulations were really silly. But that's okay too; dissatisfaction is dissatisfaction, I'll just accept reality.

Even though he felt it to be very troublesome, he could not refuse to meet battle since this was the challenge issued to him by the gods. Gilgamesh began to laugh wryly again at his status as the King of Heroes.

Passing through the deep darkness, Kotomine Kirei regained consciousness.

He felt the hot air first of all. Then, he smelt the scent of burning human fat. He opened his eyes to look around at the surroundings; the blazing inferno before his eyes seemed to be grilling the sky.

"This place is…"

He had thought that he had touched that mud and entered the inner world of the Grail again. But as he saw the naked man at his side, he immediately denied this possibility.

"Gilgamesh… what happened?"

"You really are a troublesome man. It took me a lot of effort to dig you out from under the rubble.”

Kirei diligently operated his dazed brain and began to think, intending to understand how the entire event had happened. His last memory was of the Municipal Hall’s large props storage space; he had been kneeling on the ground, and had been shot from behind and killed by Kiritsugu. – No matter how he thought about it, he should have lost his life instantly.

He tore open the vestments at his chest, checking the spot that should have been shot through.

Suddenly, the image of the black mud surfaced before his eyes.

"...?"

An illusion. There was no scar on his chest. He pressed his hand atop his heart to check.

"...Did you perform healing on me? Gilgamesh.”

"That… ah. You did look dead, but you and I are linked by the contract. I got this flesh body because of that mud, so maybe there is also some reason that you are alive again.”

The black mud that in the end had been unable to corrode Archer completely — had followed the path of the prana supply that had formerly linked Archer to his Master, and arrived at Kotomine Kirei’s physical body, becoming the source of a life-force supply that could substitute for a heart. Only thus had Kirei revived.

In other words, now Kirei relied on the prana provided by “Angra Mainyu” in order to live.

"All the Servants have been eliminated; I am the only one left. Do you know what this mean? Kirei.”

"..."

Kirei, whose mind had still not completely sobered, looked intently into Gilgamesh’s red eyes.

"It is we who have obtained the Grail, so you only need to open your eyes wide and watch. If the Grail can really make the victor’s wish come true, then this scene before you — Kotomine Kirei, it is exactly what you desire.”

A crimson hell. The tortured screams that the wind carried to his ears. Dancing tongues of flame. Kirei stared blankly at this scene.

"This is… my wish?”

Exactly. If this thing that was filling the emptiness in his heart at this moment could be called ‘satisfaction’.

"Destruction and sighs… can make me happy?”

Exactly. If the emotion that roiled within his heart at this moment could be called ‘joy’.

At this moment, Kotomine Kirei finally understood the true form of his own soul.

The collapse of everything was so beautiful.

People who were tormented were so lovable.

Tortured screams by his ears were so satisfying.

Burnt corpses were so laughable.

"... Haha.”

Unable to control the emotion that had reached boiling point, Kirei laughed hopelessly.

What kind of sin was this? What a cruel demon he was.

A world like this, cast aside by God, could actually be filled with vivid joy.

"What am I? Hahaha, what am I?!”

Even the feeling of hopelessness that tugged at his heart was so sweet. Kirei’s body trembled from his manic laughter. He could feel everything from his fingertips to the top of his head, clearly and distinctly.

Ahah, now I am alive —

I truly exist, right here —

For the first time he was aware of, and for the first time he truly felt, the fetters between him and the world.

"Why so twisted? Why so filthy? Am I really the descendant of Kotomine Risei? Hahahaha, impossible! Impossible! What is this?! Could my father really have sired a dog?!”

From a place that was completely opposite to his own faith, Kirei had found the truth. This ironic end was actually so satisfying.

He had circled so many winding roads. Had he been dreaming all along?

He had praised the preciousness of kindness, sang hymns to the beauty of holiness. Kirei had wasted twenty-odd years of his life precisely because he believed utterly in this sort of truth. He had never realized that his nature was completely contrary to this sort of truth.

"—Satisfied? Kirei."

The priest clutched his stomach, exhausted and breathing rapidly from his laughter; Gilgamesh asked in a calm voice.

"No, not enough. Just this is not enough."

Kirei wiped away the tears from his maniacal laughter, and shook his head.

"True — I have finally found my answer in this life that is full of question marks. This is a very great improvement. However, this doesn't solve any problems. I only bypassed the process and method of solving the question to arrive directly at the answer. Just like that, how will you have me acknowledge it, and even then what is there for me to acknowledge?"

If God is the Creator of All Things, then to all souls, 'happiness' is truth.

But now, there truly existed a soul that had turned its back on morality and yet obtained happiness. Kirei had also only just begun to believe that this soul was no one else but himself.

In that case, the definition of good and evil, as well as the very existence of truth, had created a contradiction. This contradiction could not be overlooked.

"Within the equation from which this strange answer is derived, there should exist a reason that is simple and easily understood. No, there is definitely one. Then what exactly is it… I must clarify it, I must find it. Even if it takes my whole life, I want to understand."

After having had enough of laughing insanely, a smile remained on his mournful face as if it was the residue of his previous manic laughter. Perhaps from today on, he would always keep this expression. The leisurely smile that meant that he had accepted the truth of himself and the world, and was able to honestly face

everything. Facing Kotomine Kirei’s completely new bearing, Gilgamesh nodded and said.

"You really don’t feel fed up… That’s alright too. I, Gilgamesh, will see how you will carry through your fearless faith in the pursuit of your way.”

Kirei looked around at the surroundings again, savoring the exquisitely beautiful scenery that the Grail had brought to him.

The quantity of the black mud that had caused the entire block to go up in flames should be nothing compared to the quantity which remained in the Great Grail. When that mud was all released, what kind of hellish picture would unfold before his eyes?

Yes — its existence was like Kirei’s own; they were both things that ran contrary to ethics. Now that Kirei thought about it, there had already been anticipation in his heart from the time that he had seen that dream world. If that kind of ‘thing’ was really born and proved its existence, then perhaps it could even derive some other explanation that was unrelated to morals and ethics.

"Angra, Mainyu —“

Thinking somewhat anxiously, Kirei spat out this name.

He must find it again; he must witness it again with his own eyes, its birth, and the value of its existence.

— Suddenly, Kirei discovered that another silhouette had appeared on the other side of the wavering tongues of flames.

His cloak, fanned out by the hot air, was tattered in many places. It was stained black in many places. That person walked as unsteadily as a sleepwalker, and wandered on the burning street.

He was Emiya Kiritsugu. The details were not clear but judging from his current appearance, it seemed he had lost Saber and had luckily survived the big fire.

What did not match with the steps that had no majesty left was the terrifying manner with which he surveyed the surroundings, like that of the vengeful dead who wailed as they wandered in burning hell. He was clearly looking for something, and in order to find it he was not afraid to even die within the sea of flame.

Could it be that he had discovered that he had not been able to kill Kirei, and so pursued him here —

Just as he was thinking this, their eyes met. Kirei unflinchingly received his empty gaze.

"Then I shall meet battle—“

Although the injury to his right hand and left leg were still the same, at this moment Kirei did not think that he would lose. He remembered again the dissatisfaction when the outcome of the previous battle had been decided. He would not let the matter drop until he taught the other man a lesson.

But things did not progress as Kirei had expected. It was as if Kirei was transparent in Kiritsugu’s eyes; as if nothing had happened, Kiritsugu moved his gaze away and continued to size up the surroundings, leaving aimlessly and without a destination.

"..."

All his fighting spirit had been drenched in a bucket of cold water; coming back to himself, Kirei discovered that there was an unspeakable gloominess in his heart.

“Nn? What is it, Kirei?”

It looked as if Gilgamesh had not noticed Kiritsugu’s form at all. Kirei silently shook his head, and considered it his answer to the King of Heroes.

Emiya Kiritsugu’s expression was clearly very strange. His once sharp gaze had vanished; his eyes just now were like empty caves, devoid of expression. The distracted impression he gave — he would not have recognized even things that were right before his eyes. Therefore, perhaps he had not even noticed Kirei watching him.

That man had become a walking corpse; it was not worth treating him as an enemy any more. Kiritsugu, who had wanted to save others but instead brought about disaster, was the loser in the true meaning of the word. He must be searching for survivors that could give him some comfort. It was really just absolute foolishness. In his current state, he would very quickly vanish in this sea of fire. There was no need to think about it anymore; this person no longer held any meaning for Kirei now.

Kirei explained to himself thus in his heart; at the same time, he cast aside the gloominess in his heart.

Even if he had really become a walking zombie, even if he was only a corpse.

Even then, Emiya Kiritsugu had actually ignored Kotomine Kirei and walked away on his own. This fact made him feel utterly humiliated.

-01:03:14

Sometimes, a broken machine did not simply and silently give up functioning. On rare occasions, it could surprisingly continue working.

The fact that Kariya was able to crawl back to the Matō mansion in Miyama was one of these very rare examples.

In fact, Kariya's physical body itself had been in a very dangerous state for the past few months. Had he not been driven forcibly by the prana that had been concentrated by the Crest Worms, he would not have been able to move. Moreover, in the condition that the Crest Worms had died under the heavy burden of Berserker's rampage, Kariya should have only been able to quietly wait for death to come.

But even so, Kariya had stood up from the ground of the basement, and escaped the City Hall that was close to collapsing. Then he crossed the burning streets and walked the long night road that traversed Fuyuki City. This was a miracle fulfilled with no thanks to the Holy Grail.

However, right now Kariya could never realize how rare such cases were, and was also unable to give thanks for the pity that God had shown him.

He had long forgotten what time it was, and his mind had become muddled a long time ago. He couldn't even recall properly how he had escaped tonight. The heavily damaged body could fall down any minute, and even his psyche had been eroded to its limits. Only the conviction of 'save Sakura' enabled Kariya to force himself to arrive here.

Standing before that familiar stairwell, full of a rancid and rotten stench, Kariya finally relaxed as he faced the mass of darkness below.

Sakura was locked beneath those stairs, deep in the darkness of the basement. A little bit more, just a little bit more to go.

Just like he had expected; no one hindered his movements. Zōken, who had been monitoring Kariya's actions through the Crest Worms, must have thought that Kariya had died on the battlefield in Shinto a long time ago. For Kariya, who had lain in wait for an opportunity, this was a chance that couldn't be missed. The Worms within Kariya had died; they were killed by Berserker. They had admitted defeat before Kariya; Kariya had defeated the Worms.

So this time – this time he must be able to rescue Sakura, who was imprisoned, and run away with her.

Kariya walked down the stairs. Although he couldn't determine whether he was walking or crawling – or even just rolling down the stairs – he knew he was advancing downwards. The ruckus of the Worms sounded by his ears; they were angry for having an intruder. He must hurry, must finish his work before Zōken discovered it.

The young and small silhouette of a girl appeared deep within the darkness. Like always, Sakura had been violated and consumed by the Worms tonight. Her lost and empty gaze suddenly focused upon Kariya, who was approaching her.

"… Uncle …?"

"Sakura – I'm here to save you. It's, alright – "

He finally voiced this confession. He had waited far too long for this moment.

You don't need to despair anymore, you don't need to give anything up anymore. The nightmare had finished, and it won't return.

He took off the handcuffs and shackles that tightly bound the young girl's soft skin. *Go, Sakura, go and take back the future that you should have.*

Kariya took Sakura's hand and left the worm storage room, then they silently and inconspicuously crossed the Miyama district at night. Aoi and Rin were waiting for them in the next town. The mother was finally reunited with her daughter in that memorable courtyard in the Zenjō mansion. Kariya would take all three of them to go travelling, to a place that no one knows about, a place where no one would disturb them. There, they would pass every day in happiness. Everyone would happily play games like they had once promised. Aoi watched her two daughters running in a field of flowers with a smile on her face. Sakura plucked clovers, and Rin wove them into garlands. They fought for the chance to place the garland on Kariya's head while simultaneously saying they want to give the garland to 'Daddy' as a gift. Aoi, who wore two garlands, grasped Kariya's hand tightly as she smiled. Ahh, thank you. Kariya laughed and cried at the same time, and took his beloved wife and daughters into a tight embrace. Daddy is so happy to have such a wife and such daughters. He was the happiest person in the world. Therefore, there was nothing to regret about. All this was worthy to risk his life for. There would be rewards for all the pain he had suffered, and all that he had wanted were all within his hands –

■■■■■

Sakura stared at the corpse of the man who had fallen before her in the icy-cold darkness of the worm storage. This man was muttering to himself even till the end, and a satisfied smile was on his face even as he died.

How odd. Why would this man return here? Why did he still want to live when he was in such a despicable state?

Although Sakura couldn't understand why, she clearly knew why he was in anguish, and why he was dead.

– *You must not disobey Grandfather.*

Everyone in the Makiri house knew that, but why wouldn't this man obey that rule? He was an adult, but he was helplessly stupid.

Why, why would this man choose such a meaningless death?

After a brief consideration – ahh, that was why. Sakura suddenly understood it.

This must be her lesson tonight.

A lesson to teach her what would happen to those who disobeyed Grandfather's will. This man died here so Sakura could see a real example with her own eyes.

Yes, I understood, Grandfather.

The girl nodded obediently. She burned this scene deep into her memory while she stared, unmoving, at the corpse surrounded by worms that was gradually becoming smaller and smaller.

-00:00:00

- Before he realized it, he was on a burnt field.

Some kind of large fire had occurred.

The cityscape he was familiar with had turned to ruins, like the scars of battlefields that you see in films.

When dawn broke, the course of the fire weakened.

The wall of flame that had been so high now sunk, and the buildings had mostly crumbled down.

.....It was a wondrous feeling to be the only thing within all this to remain in his original form.

He was the only living thing around.

Was he very lucky, or was his house built in a very lucky place?

He couldn't tell which it was, but in any case, he was the only one alive.

I lived on, so I have to keep living - was what he thought.

It would be dangerous to stay here indefinitely - and so he walked on aimlessly.

But it wasn't because he couldn't stand being burnt black like the people who had collapsed around him.

...Most likely, more so than the feeling of not wanting to be like them,

there was a stronger feeling that bound his heart.

Even so, he held nothing like hope.

It was a wonder that he had lived up to this point, so he did not think that he would be saved now.

To start with, he cannot be saved.

No matter what he did, he cannot possibly leave this crimson world.

It was so absolute a hell that even a young child was able to comprehend it.

And so he fell.

Perhaps there was no oxygen; perhaps he had already lost the function of taking in oxygen.

At any rate, he fell, gazing at the sky which was beginning to cloud over.

There were the human figures around him, burnt black and quite shrunken.

Dark clouds covered the sky, telling him that rain will fall soon.

...That would be good. The fire would end if rain fell.

At the end, with a deep breath, he looked up at the rainclouds.

Even though he could no longer breath. Just - it's so, painful.

For the people who can no longer even complain, he spoke with frank emotions.

It was just so painful. Living was painful. So much so that he even thought he might as well just disappear now and be at ease.

With a hazy consciousness, he meaninglessly stretched out his hand.

He did not stretch out his hand to seek salvation.

Just - the sky was so, far.

He simply thought that in his final moment.

And so his consciousness disappeared, and the raised hand suddenly fell onto the ground.

.....No.

It should have fallen.

The powerless sinking hand was grasped by a large hand.

.....He remembered that face.

The figure of the man who was joyous from the bottom of his heart at finding a living human being, with tears amassing in his eyes.

- Because, he looked so very delighted.

So much so that, it was as though the one who was saved was not me, but the man.

And so.

In such a way that he could feel envy for the him who was directly before death - the man said, thank you, as though he was expressing gratitude for something.

Thank you, for letting me find this.

As though he was expressing gratitude to someone for letting him help and save just one person - he showed a smile that could not be surpassed.

エピローグ

Epilogue

The Next Day

Every news channel on TV was reporting on the large fire that had taken place in Shinto last night.

But even apart from that, there was still a gloom cast over today's breakfast at the MacKenzies'.

The table seemed rather empty with one less person. The male guest who had been boarding in the house for some time had left for his home country the previous day due to some urgent issue. He had asked Waver to thank the MacKenzies for their hospitality and care in recent days, and apologized very much for not bidding them farewell in the face of his sudden departure.

"Alex-san must have safely returned to the UK, right?"

Martha MacKenzie murmured with a worried look. Waver nodded calm her down.

"He called me back from the airport this morning. That guy, doesn't he know anything about local time differences?"

Waver told this massive lie with a poker face. He himself, however, was quite astonished that he could lie as easily and simply as that.

"He called you back? I really didn't notice. Ah, but that kind of style really suits him."

With a nod and a smile on her face, Martha turned her gaze back to the TV screen and then she looked gloomy again.

"… That's still quite unfortunate, but then again, there have indeed been a lot of disturbances lately. But maybe that's not a bad thing either. At least those insincere visitors might change their itinerary now."

"…"

Looking at the screen and the totally burned and barren field it showed, Waver could not help but feel deeply ashamed.

The fire that had occurred close to the Municipal Hall was undoubtedly caused by the War of the Holy Grail. Although he did not know which one out of the three remaining Masters and Servants had created this tragic scene, he and Rider might

have prevented this incident had they been present. That was why he found it difficult to suppress his deep regret.

This tragedy would not occur in the future. Though ended in the worst way possible, the alien events that threatened Fuyuki would not occur again. The fourth War of the Holy Grail, which had sacrificed countless innocent lives, had been put to a complete end last night.

Remembering all of the tragedy that had happened back there – he felt that it could already be considered a miracle that he was still alive.

“Umm, Grandpa, Grandma, may I discuss something with you?”

Hearing Waver’s voice, which sounded different from usual, the old couple placed their coffee cups down.

“What is it?”

“Ah, actually… I want to take a break from school for a while. This is a decision I made after discussing it with father back in Toronto. Rather than going to school, at this time I’d like to do something else first.”

“Oh.”

“Ahhh.”

Hearing this surprising declaration from their grandson, the old couple couldn’t help but stare at each other and at him.

“But why all of a sudden… You don’t hate going to school, right?”

“No, not at all… It is just that so far, I haven’t had any interest in anything at all besides studying, which makes me kind of regretful. So… Ah, I want to travel. I want to visit the outside world, so I can understand more things before I decide on what to do with my life.”

“Really?”

Martha seemed to be very glad, and smiled while clapping her hands together.

“Did you hear that, Glen? Waver-chan actually said something that sounds like what Alex-san would say.”

Hearing this evaluation, with some relief and a bit of a lonely pang, Waver smiled bitterly.

“Anyway, there’s a lot of things you should prepare beforehand. It’s vital to do your homework first. Do you want to start by finding a job? … Ah, but here’s a problem. You can’t get a job in Fuyuki if you can’t speak Japanese, right?”

Hmm... Glen crossed his arms in front of his chest and looked deep in thought.

“There are also a lot of foreigners in this town. If I beg some of my acquaintances, maybe they can find you a solution.”

“So Waver, will you stay in Japan for a while?”

Looking at Martha, who was wearing such a happy expression, Waver nodded.

“Ah, if it’s all right… If it’s not too much trouble for you?”

“Of course not.”

Martha was so happy that she almost jumped with joy, and could not resist clapping as she replied. Her husband, Glen, just sat in silence next to her, but gave Waver a look of trust and expectation. The boy also sat up with his back straight and returned a solemn look.

※※※※※

Waver returned to his room alone, and reviewed this room which was bathed in the light of the dawn.

Eleven days— it was such a short time, but this room was already dyed with the color of the person who had lived there.

There were old magazines, paper dinner bags that he had thrown everywhere, and an empty whiskey bottle that had rolled into the corner.

They were all traces of the other person who had eaten and drunk and rested in this room. This was a color that did not belong to Waver.

Was he a ghost? Or a familiar? Thinking of all that nonsense, Waver wondered. This was not a joke. If it was just a ‘soul’, how was it possible that such a vivid ‘color’ still lingered in the room?

However, this room would be no longer be dyed by this ‘color’.

From now on, there would be only one person living here, and that was Waver. It would only be stained with Waver's personality and his presence. The previous color would eventually be erased. It was inevitable.

Although it felt regrettable and lonely, one certainty was that the color repainting the room must be extraordinarily vivid. Only so could it cover the color of 'that person', which was brighter than anyone else's.

Waver sat down on the bed and pulled out the collector's edition of *The Iliad* from his backpack.

It had only been eleven short days, but the pages were already getting dark with repeated readings. The face of that eternally smiling man seemed to emerge before him again when he looked at this book, which he felt difficult to understand no matter how many times he read it. That man who had pushed himself forward with the adventures of the hero Achilles, who had challenged his own limits and finally made his own life into a legend.

And such a man had once been at Waver's side, and had lived and fought with him.

Those dream-like scenes that he had described to Waver felt almost like lies. However, in the end, Waver was still attracted to his happiness—

He could not deny that he envied him. He had even thought of going together with him.

But he had left Waver behind after all. He made that decision the moment he invited Waver to become his subordinate and received Waver's reply. Did that man make a wrong decision because of Waver's wrong reply back then?

"Why are you talking about nonsense like 'subordinate'! Are we not friends? If you're going to battle, of course I'll accompany you!"

If only back then Waver had been able to say those words in the wind, say those words as if they were equals…

Then that man would definitely have smiled knowingly, and perhaps would have allowed Waver to mount his war horse in the end.

"But… The important thing is that in the end, I never showed him my 'unwillingness'…"

Waver couldn’t help but sigh. He was still far from standing on equal terms with that man. His own weaknesses were still all exposed at the end. He regretted, and he thought it a pity. Perhaps he was just too proud.

But he wasn’t anxious. After all, Waver hadn’t yet reached the age at which that man had begun his journey, and the marks of that man’s blood-boiling and amazing adventures could still be seen in every corner of this world. Waver would go and find all of that. Perhaps, one day, he would find the footprints of that man in some place beyond that far-distant sea.

Suddenly, Waver’s eyes landed on the paper bag beside the television.

Come to think of it, that guy had bought this stuff with joy, but had left without even taking it out of its packaging.

Waver opened the bag and removed the gaming console and the disk within. He had even bought a joystick. Feeling his eyes suddenly become hot with tears, Waver forced them down.

“… I will not play this silly stuff.”

But he had just decided to try new things, and one was right in front of him. Although it was silly, the idea was worth a try.

Yet, was this kind of stuff really that interesting?

Waver frowned as he looked at the bag. He then began following the instructions to connect the video game with the TV.

Half a Year Later

“– I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand up on the earth.”

A funeral procession progressed alone in the icy-cold rain.

A young girl was the person who managed the funeral.

No expressions of sorrow or anxiety were written on her, but she only numbly went on according to the procedure of the funeral. While this expression made those who came to mourn feel her strength, none of them held any feelings of pity towards her.

It was a funeral for a high-born clan. For elders, children who grew up under such a strict education should be able to bear anything. The mourners sitting here all held the same belief.

“And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see Him with my own eyes – I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me… Amen.”

Then the coffin was buried into the earth. With some words of prayer from the others, the mourners left one by one. In the rain that once again regained its silence, only the young girl who took charge of the funeral and the priest who led the ceremonies were left behind.

“Good work. It was already very splendid as the debut of the next Head of the family. I believe your father would feel proud too.”

Rin just nodded in silence hearing those words of praise for her. Her left wrist had already been carved with the Magic Crest of the Tōsaka family. Her body was still not used to the Crest that had only recently been grafted and kept on inflicting pain on her. But there was no sign of agony shown on the young girl’s face, and she endured the funeral until the very last minute. Indeed, this willpower of hers didn’t match her age.

The letter that Tokiomi wrote, which entrusted everything to the Association after his death, was almost perfect; it was truly a real portrait of the man himself. The transfer of the body and the extraction of the Crest were all entrusted to the Association’s headquarters in London by Kotomine Kirei, Rin’s guardian. The Crest was handed to Tokiomi’s friends to be guarded securely to ensure that it would be impeccably transplanted onto Rin’s body in the future.

Transplanting a Crest into someone will cause a great burden to the body, therefore it was best to transplant it to the family successor before his or her secondary sexual characteristics have developed completely. However, when the previous Head suddenly passes away, many unthought-of difficulties often would occur. But Tokiomi had overcome this and made impeccable preparations. He had passed the essence of magecraft that the Tōsaka house had complied over the generations all unto Rin without omitting a single thing.

However, due to the numerous procedures involved with the transport of the body and the removal of the Crest, over six months passed before Tokiomi's body was returned home. As a result, people who attended the funeral procession today were only the few who knew the truth of his death, completely unrelated to the prestige and achievements the family had achieved in its homeland. A lonely funeral like this is probably a sin one must bear as a magus.

Kirei looked around the cemetery, which suddenly became desolate, and turned around to meet the taxi that had waited at the back.

"It's about time to let Mother come out, right?"

"– Mm, it's about time."

Tōsaka Aoi, who was supposed to organize the funeral as the widow, was unable to appear in front of the guests due to her health condition that required her to stay in bed. Although reluctant to let her come into contact with outsiders, Rin still wanted her mother to meet her father one last time before the coffin was to be buried beneath the earth.

Rin had been waiting for her mother's arrival since before the other mourners arrived. She walked towards the car, helped her mother onto the wheelchair, and pushed it towards Tokiomi's grave. In the wheelchair, although the widow still looked very young and beautiful, there wasn't any expression engraved on her face; only a hazy, dreamy stare that looked into the void.

"Mom, here, say a final goodbye to father."

Hearing Rin's urging sound, Aoi's dreamy eyes finally slowly gathered on one spot on the ground.

Her eyes slowly swept around the gravestones surrounding her, and opened her eyes wide as if having finally realized something.

“Ah – What, Rin? Is it someone’s funeral today?”

“Yes. Because father passed away.”

“Oh my goodness! I’ll have to hurry and take out Tokiomi’s funeral clothes – Rin, go help Sakura get dressed. Ahhh what to do what to do. I haven’t prepared anything…”

Aoi, who was sitting on a wheelchair, sank into a brief panic. Then, she suddenly bent down like a marionette with its strings broken. Moreover, when she finally lifted her head up again, she showed a gentle smile towards the empty air before her, and stretched out her fingers in front of her.

“See, my dear, your tie is skewed again. And there’s a string sticking to your shoulder. Haha, try to cheer up a bit. After all, you’re the father that Rin and Sakura are proud of…”

Aoi prattled on and on to the husband that only she could see. Meanwhile, Rin simply stayed by her mother’s side and guarded her in silence.

Tōsaka Aoi, who had received brain damage as a result of oxygen deprivation, was unable to communicate properly with Kirei and Rin anymore. Undoubtedly for Rin, Aoi had been an innocent victim swept up into the Fourth Heaven’s Feel just like her father.

However, for Aoi who was no longer able to correctly comprehend reality, perhaps this was happier for her. Her heart had remained at that time when Sakura was still in the house and Tokiomi was still alive. She wandered in the spacious Tōsaka mansion, conversed and laughed with the husband and younger daughter in her memories, and lived on forever in the beautiful dream of a happy family.

Only Rin was left behind in the real world by herself. She took care of such a mother, but could only look at her silently and was unable to move a single step into that happy picture. She hid the sadness that no one else could feel, bore the heavy burden of being the head of a magecraft clan upon her young body, and endured the pain of the Crest. It was truly a far-too-cruel fate for a young girl who was only a primary school student.

Kotomine Kirei, however, thought that it was an incomparably good strike of luck that he was made the guardian of such a tragic girl.

He could only feel joy through the other’s pain and suffering. To Kirei, who had known his twisted true colors a long time ago, Rin’s current predicaments were

undoubtedly the best environment to make her grow into a sentimental girl. Since Kirei would be able to appraise everything from the closest distance, it was undoubtedly an enjoyment comparable to tasting the most outstanding wine.

However – what angered him was the fact that he had never received such rewards.

Though she was burdened with this tragic fate, the young girl didn't shed a single tear. Not even a weak word was ever said by her.

Even now, before her pitiful mother who could not comprehend her father's passing, Rin still kept a calm look. She forcibly suppressed her sorrow and grief inside her heart, and waited for her mother to calm down. This would have been a situation where other children of her age, who were spoiled to death by their parents, would never have been able to endure.

Rin had already acknowledged and accepted her fate, and was courageous enough to boldly face it. Such rare pride and self-control were the greatest virtues possessed by the young girl named Tōsaka Rin, but it was the thing that angered Kirei the most.

After having had her full of bitterness and pain, this jewel named Rin began to take on shape from the unshaped raw ore. He had originally thought that seeing the shameful behavior of her beloved mother would wound her soul, but he did not expect her to accept her mother's weakness of becoming enthralled in dreams with a merciful and accommodating heart.

This young girl was advancing step by step towards the heretic road named magecraft. Perhaps one day she would become just like her father, and discard all the twisted evil of a magus and form a most righteous and balanced personality. Of course, that would be the most boring development for Kirei. He had originally expected very much to see just what kind of a twisted flower would bloom out of Tokiomi's daughter.

Keeping all of the secrets in his heart, Kirei placed his hand on Rin's shoulders as if encouraging her.

"I will stay in Japan for some time… Is there anything else you're worried about for the future?"

"… Nothing much. I've been too much of a trouble for you, but now it's fine."

The young girl answered with a tough tone, not even looking at Kirei.

Rin obeyed her father's last words, and did not object to having Kotomine Kirei become her guardian. However, she found it difficult to cover up her spite toward him. He was Tokiomi's assistant and headed toward the same battlefield, but in the end still failed to protect Tokiomi. Rin's heart was still full of anger and suspicion toward the a man named Kirei till this day.

Kirei only felt Rin's inexperienced hatred to be laughable. What would the expression on this girl's face be when she one day came to know the truth? He would be quite looking forward to see it.

"We will meet again after six months. Then the second Crest transplantation process can be performed. Please take care of yourself."

"…You don't have to say a thing. I already know about."

"I think that I will be mainly working overseas in the future. I'm terribly sorry to say this, but I think I cannot live in Japan. I am truly unsuitable to be a guardian…"

"If you're busy then it cannot be helped. I will obviously take good care of mother and the Tōsaka family while you're gone. You can go crusade against heretics or do whatever you like as long as you don't bring us trouble."

Hah, even Rin can bluff like this? Her tone today was sharper than usual. Perhaps today really was more painful than ever for this girl.

A rather sickening idea suddenly flashed through Kirei's mind.

"– Rin, you will be the true Head of the Tōsaka house from today onwards. In order to celebrate this special occasion, I am giving you a gift."

As he said that, Kirei pulled out a dagger from within his coat together with its sheath.

This was the same Azoth Sword that was given to him by Tokiomi as a symbol of friendship. Today's funeral also made Kirei remember the man who had passed away, so he brought this dagger along. It was also a little compensation for the man who had died by his hand.

"This is what I received from Tokiomi-sensei in the past when he recognized the achievements of my magecraft studies – I think it's better that you take care of it from now on."

Rin took the dagger, pulled the dagger from its sheath, and studied it carefully. She caressed the leather of the hilt and the magecraft runes on the blade almost reverently, as if she could feel the warmth of her father's fingers within.

“… Father …”

A small ripple suddenly appeared on the dagger that the girl held in her hands – a single drop of tear suddenly tumbled down the immaculate blade.

This was the first time that Rin had shed tears in front of Kirei.

As if having tasted the wine he had been waiting for too long, Kirei’s heart shook with joy.

Rin didn’t know anything. The dagger that she held in her hand and received her tears was once fully stained with the fresh blood that poured out of Tokiomi’s heart. Perhaps she would even consider this dagger as a memento of her memorable father and deferentially treasure it in the future. Of course, the pre-requisite was that she did not know this was the murder weapon that killed her father.

This extreme irony and the pleasure of violating a pure heart made Kotomine Kirei receive an insurmountable satisfaction.

Rin, who was crying with her head lowered, was completely ignorant to the priest beside her who was blossoming with a silent smile. She only held on tightly to the dagger of fate in her hands.

Five Years Later

It was a night with a beautiful moon. Emiya Kiritsugu gazed out at the moon as he silently stood by the window.

Although it was already winter, the temperature wasn't very low; it was just cold enough to let the skin feel the slight prickle of a chill. It was the ideal weather to view the moon.

A boy sat beside him. He was also quietly gazing out at the moon with Kiritrugu.

His name was Shirō.

He was the only existence that Kiritsugu managed to save from the fire that made him lose everything.

It had been five years since then. Shirō, who was a kid, was also gradually growing up.

Kiritsugu adopted Shirō, who had no one left to rely on due to the fire, and managed to barely live on after tidying up the ruined house with the storage room that Irisviel had bought.

As for why he did that – even he himself did not know. He had nowhere else to go. Did he also have no more reasons left to keep living?

All the goals and beliefs the man named Emiya Kiritsugu had once possessed were burnt to ashes with that fire. The thing that returned from that barren field was simply a corpse that had retained a beating heart.

In fact, had he not saved Shirō, then Kiritsugu would perhaps have truly died a long time ago.

However, he met Shirō. He met this child who had fortunately escaped from the raging fire that had claimed innumerable lives.

That was the miracle which resurrected him from the shell that was once named Emiya Kiritsugu.

Even if he were to look back on it now, this had been a very wondrous life.

The man who had lost his wife and daughter again became a father –

The child who had lost his parents again became a son –

Now that he thought about it, he had repeated this unchanging life day after day.

Shirō was now calling Kiritsugu ‘old man’ while the latter hadn’t even hit 40 years old. Maybe the kid felt it was more natural that way.

But the truth was that the stamina still lingering within Kiritsugu’s body was nothing more than a spluttering candle in the wind. In truth, he was not much different from an old man after all.

After that, he peacefully and calmly passed his days as if he was living within the dream of another man.

On that day five years ago, a line had been drawn across his life, which had already lost everything. No one else had disappeared before Kiritsugu after that.

Be it Shirō, Taiga, Raiga-san or the youngsters in the Fujimura Group; none of them had left him since they met, and they were still together even now.

The meetings he used to have with other people were simply the beginning of separation.

However, such a happiness was not without a reason.

Because the things that he had lost in the past would never come back.

Kiritsugu had repeatedly used the excuse of ‘traveling overseas’ to get Shirō to stay home while he traveled to the Einsberns. He wanted to save his daughter, who had been left all alone within the City of Winter.

However, no matter how obstinately Kiritsugu repeated his visits, Jubstacheit was still unwilling to open the forest’s bounded field. That was understandable. All the efforts the Einsberns put into the fourth Heaven’s Feel came to nothing because of Kiritsugu’s last-minute betrayal. A man such as Kiritsugu would have to remain silent even if he was punished, but Acht did not do that. Did he want to put the traitor to exile like a stray dog and let it struggle on its last legs, and carry that shameful title for the rest of its life? Or did he plan to let Kiritsugu never see his daughter again

and use that as the most severe punishment that can be inflicted? No matter what, it was already a fact.

Had he been the Kiritsugu of the past, the infamous “Magus Killer”, then he might have been able to forcibly break through this icy bounded field and rush to his daughter’s side. However, the current Kiritsugu had been touched by “Angra Mainyu” and had already been corroded by this curse. His flesh was getting weaker and weaker. His limbs atrophied, his sight began to fade, and he had completely lost the ability to use magecraft. He was not much different from a terminally ill patient. He couldn’t even find the starting point of the bounded field, and could only wander in the blizzard, waiting till death.

He understood all his attempts had been in vain – recently Kiritsugu had already faintly felt that his time was probably up. In other words, he probably hadn’t had much time left since the moment he became cursed by the black mud.

Therefore he had recently been staying home all the time, drowning in memories as he passed the time in a daze.

What had his life been about –

As he thought of this, he silently gazed up at the moon with Shirō.

“… When I was a kid, I used to want to be a hero of justice very much.”

Suddenly, he muttered this unconsciously.

Like a shipwreck that had sunken beneath the surface a long long time ago, those untouched and forgotten words suddenly escaped from his lips – that was right. He seemed to have said something like that to someone else some time ago, although he didn’t manage to fulfill it at the end. But just when did that happen?

However, when he heard Kiritsugu, Shirō suddenly showed an expression of displeasure.

“What? You’re saying you used to want to, then have you given up now?”

Since the boy harbored a deep admiration for Kiritsugu, Shirō seemed to hate having Kiritsugu say such self-deprecating words. Kiritsugu had often felt extremely ashamed toward this sentiment.

The boy thought his foster father was an incomparably great man. He did not understand Emiya Kiritsugu’s past – including that disaster which made the man lose everything. He simply and merely made Kiritsugu a goal to be admired.

The spirit of self-sacrifice and sense of justice that Shirō held in his heart were so great that it almost seemed twisted, and all this were displayed through the extreme respect and admiration that he showed to Kiritsugu. That was also the only regret in the days that the father and the son passed together. Shirō wished to become Kiritsugu. He wanted to follow the road that Kiritsugu had walked. Although Kiritsugu wanted to tell him how foolish such an idea was, he didn't manage to say it even till the end.

If Shirō lived like Kiritsugu and walked toward destruction just like him, then these five peaceful years of life would become a curse at the end as well.

Is your aspiration still there? Shirō questioned back. This made Kiritsugu's heart ache – that's right, how wonderful would it be if it could gradually disappear with the passage of time.

Kiritsugu pretended to gaze out towards the distant moon, and hid the sorrowful memories with a bitter smile.

"Hmm, it is rather regrettable. Heroes have a time limit too, and it's hard to fulfill once you become an adult. It would have been better if I realized that earlier."

Had he realized it earlier – then he wouldn't have been tricked by the sweet lie of miracles that flew the banner called dreams.

Kiritsugu had once released a demon powerful enough to destroy the world because of his aspirations. It was too late when he finally realized his mistake. Countless people had died because of it, including Shirō's own father and mother.

And that harbinger of Hell was still lurking beneath Mount Enzō even now. After that battle, Kiritsugu had repeatedly visited that place with dynamite, and spent years to map out the situation of a few leylines. He had meticulously created a 'bump' at a location leading towards Mount Enzō. That might be the last time for him to use magecraft in his life.

The prana produced from the junction of numerous leylines will collect upon that 'bump' with time. When its limit is reached, a localized earthquake will be triggered deep within Mount Enzō. It would take a minimum of 30 years and a maximum of about 40 years for the 'bump' to break. If all his calculations were correct, then the cavern within Mount Enzō would collapse and seal away the "Greater Grail" forever. Though he would not be able to live to see that day, Kiritsugu had done the best he could to prevent the fifth Heaven's Feel 60 years later.

Shirō seemed to have been guided into a deep contemplation from Kiritsugu's casual words. However, he seemed to have accepted Kiritsugu's viewpoint, and answered with a nod.

"Really? Then there's really nothing you can do."

"True. I'm really powerless."

Kiritsugu also answered with a slight hint of heartfelt pain.

Nothing you can do –

There wasn't much lament or sorrow in that phrase. Kiritsugu gazed up at the night sky.

" – Ahh, what a beautiful moon – "

It was as if this was the only night in his life that had such a beautiful moon, and Kiritsugu was overjoyed with sharing such a beautiful memory with Shirō.

"Hmm. If you can't fulfill it anymore, then let me fulfill it for you."

The youth promised casually in the elegant night. He said that he'll achieve something, which Kiritsugu had longed for but could not fulfill, in Kiritsugu's place.

In that moment, Kiritsugu remembered.

He had also made a promise like this. He had also said something like this before a person that was more important to him than anyone else.

Back then, he had firmly believed that the things within his heart will never be lost. But that confidence – had now been forgotten, forgotten until just a moment ago.

"Dad is an adult already, so maybe you can't do anything anymore. But I'm alright. So entrust it to me, entrust Dad's dream –"

Shirō kept saying those words that sounded like a promise. His words, together with tonight's view, became an unforgettable memory that was carved into Kiritsugu's heart.

That's right. If it was under such a beautiful moon – then he would never forget.

Emiya Shirō's very first thought and this precious and innocent prayer will definitely became a most beautiful memory, and be forever retained in his heart.

However, had the boy really inherited the dream of his foolish father, he would probably begin an endless lament and experience a bottomless despair.

But he would definitely be able to recall the self that existed at this moment as long as he remembered this night. He would remember this heart his young self had; this heart which was fearless, unknown to sorrow, and full of aspirations.

That would also be – the salvation that Kiritsugu, who had lost himself without knowing and had been grinded down by time little by little, had hoped for.

“Yes. Ahh – then I’ll be at peace now.”

Even if Shirō walks the same path as him, he would never become the same man.

All the scars in his heart seemed to have healed when he understood this. Emiya Kiritsugu closed his eyes.

Then –

This man who accomplished nothing in his life and did not win a single victory stopped breathing. His last moments were full of relief, and he passed away as if he had merely fallen asleep.

– *Kerry, what kind of a man would you like to become?*

She asked under the dazzling sunlight.

He would never forget her smile and her gentleness.

This world is so beautiful. How he wished that time would forever be stopped in this beautiful moment.

As he thought this, he spoke his promise without knowing.

I’ll never forget what I felt today.

– I, want to be a hero of justice!

Postface

Urobuchi Gen

The re-creation of a so-called established work—is it a good or a bad thing?

To be made into an animation, or a game, or a novel; a sequel, a spinoff… I had once jumped for joy when I heard these news about my beloved work.

During my childhood, I had also greatly looked forward to another meeting with my beloved characters; I looked forward to seeing their heroics again. Until today, these remembrances are all treasures from the bottom of my heart.

But after stepping over the threshold of the new century, when I heard this sort of information about my beloved work, I always furrowed my brow, and my chest was always full of unease.

Of course, sometimes this unease proves to be just paranoia. I also obtained many additional beautiful experiences from those sequels. But what is undeniable is that in many cases, all I feel is disappointment, depression and the incomparable indignation of having the precious memories of your heart tarnished.

This so-called re-creation—is it a good or a bad thing?

The ‘wish’ that it is ‘good’ still echoes in the bottom of my heart until today.

That feeling in the past, of hoping that the story would never end—I have not forgotten it to this day.

But, ‘feeling’ is calling out loudly ‘no’. Definitely nothing good can come out of this. The new producers only borrowed the repute of the original and used it to make money—that is all. The appraisal and reputation will all be shared equally with the original author regardless of whether the sequel is good or bad. In that case, who would be willing to pour their enthusiasm into the work? As long as the quality is passable, just sell a large quantity while the media is still stirring—this sort of situation has already repeated itself countless times. Now, what reason is there to let me optimistically believe that ‘this wish will definitely be communicated to the other party’?

‘Yes’, ‘reason’ very unwillingly says. It is hopeless.

Now, the otaku entertainment form that includes animation, games and light novels is currently producing large amounts of profit as an ‘industry’. Yes, it is already an ‘industry’. Marketing principles are driving the cycle of supply and demand in endless acceleration. In this system where the ideal is that the producer’s benefit is paramount, and there is a continuous supply of consumers, it is extremely foolish to proclaim a work finished when it exists only as a single commodity. A limited number of ideas, in the process of being turned into games, animation, comics, light novels or even made into figurines, from re-releases, to repackages, to anthologies, re-translations and remakes… So-called ecology is recycle and reuse, wringing dry every drop of usefulness from the original work. And the trust of the fans has also been challenged in the process of collecting these countless products.

Because, only the continuation of economic activity that has to do with the original work is the specific proof of ‘enduring love’.

And the problem of degeneration of the original material, caused by recycling and reusing, is as meaningless as asking about the quality of recycled paper. Since the buyer is only going on buying due to inertia, the seller will care even less. Just like that, the dynamism of the economy is stimulated; countless fathers feed their families on the income they gain from this. Will anyone question this?

There is money to be earned from re-creation. Re-creation will bring benefit to all kinds of people. If one were to stand up and deny this public welfare, he will suffer the people’s condemnation, which would leave behind painful memories. He will lose his friends, lose his sponsors, even losing his wage that he uses to put bread on the table. I, who have understood all this, am already a mature grown-up. I have already learnt to watch for people’s moods, to respect the common sense and practices of the industry, to master the traditional virtues of the Japanese that is to smile and say yes.

——Is re-creation a good or a bad thing?

Of course, there is passion poured into this. But even more, it is an economic calculation.

Many sequels have been derived like this, along with many things that profane the original work that are flooding the world.

Walking in downtown Akihabara, I find that I cannot laugh no matter what. Surrounded by so many people who have the same interest, what is that negative feeling that is always entrenched in the bottom of my heart?

At last, I gave up trying to get to the bottom of it. Mm, I'm not good at holding on to those troublesome things. As compared to single-mindedly thinking very hard, it is still action that is more suited to my temper.

As compared to making irresponsible remarks to people, it would be better to make one re-creation that I acknowledge. As compared to those manufacturers, guys who are not involved and only know how to sigh are even more contemptible.

Of course, this is taking a very big risk. Even if one has extreme passion for the original work, if he does not have the skill needed to sustain it and the strength needed to finish it, he will definitely not succeed. And once he fails, the hazard is even more shockingly large. It is not only his reputation that will be damaged; even that which he loves will also be profaned.

But I wrote it anyway.

To me, writing is like raising flowers.

Attracted by the beauty of the flowers, this emotion bore fruit in my heart, and scattered its seeds. Precisely because the seeds remained in my chest, I fervently watered and put fertilizer, dreaming of letting the flowers that once had been now bloom again, and let everyone experience its beauty.

I don't actually have any ideals or assertions, nor do I detest the ways of the world; much less do I have any uniqueness that merits commendation. It is only that, in my heart there are always seeds that I got from other people. I like shootout films, wuxia films, science fiction films; I like Transformers, monsters of the universe, and western vengeance shows. Precisely because this love has already almost broken out of my body several times, I chose this profession. So this which I do—each time is a re-creation. Since I am like this, then how can I accept that it is denied? If it were possible, I would really like to stick out my chest and cheer loudly for it. Even though this re-creation industry before my eyes is empty of content, and does not know the meaning of shame, and is where parasites run rampant— I still believe that the joy of writing is a noble emotion.

This book of mine, that wasted the entirety of more than one thousand and four hundred pages of paper for the sake of shouting out ‘I love Fate’, is now respectfully set before you.

This is a long and arduous fight. To be honest, I have poured immeasurable effort into this work. But from my perspective, this was all worth it. This is my answer; I hold on to this revelation every moment that I go through the process of creation.

Is re-creation a good or a bad thing? … I think that after today I will not be troubled by this again.

I will gamble everything I have, and continue to write pieces that I am pleased with, and I will use this as evidence to deny all negative influence.

In short, it is like this. This is what the process of finishing these four books has taught me.

Suddenly looking back, I, who had once intended to stop writing right here… who is to say that I was not saved by this work that is Fate/Zero?

Yes, I have derived my answer.

Dear readers, please be at ease. After today I, Urobuchi, will still continue to strive.

Commentary

Nasu Kinoko

This is how his journey ends.

At long last, the journey of an individual who cannot be considered truly vile or evil, only a man with a mundane and ordinary wish as his goal, finally returns to its starting point, and the curtains fall.

Mistakes along every step of the road.

It is already ten years later when the man who did not attain salvation obtains his long-cherished wish.

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"Ahhh – Well done, Urobuchi Gen."

Finished reading all four volumes, I close the book with heavy feelings in my heart and raise my face to the sky before letting out a sincere word of thanks.

Too cruel.

Too heavy.

No one reaches salvation at all.

But despite these sacrifices, there are still some sparks of light remaining in our hearts.

Creation and destruction are a pair of twins. Everything was swallowed up in crimson flames and all disappeared with the wind. Yet in the end, a new life budded forth from a desolate battlefield that should only have been left with infinite sorrow.

This light was infinitely small compared to all that had been lost, but it was incomparably nobler as a result. We who can only watch can only feel touched by that light.

I only hope to add a little more value to the story.

Even if he himself did not succeed in the end, the heir to his aspiration will one day appear –

I firmly believe that the readers of this book feel the same as I do.

An overwhelming sense of speed and pace.

The end came like an avalanche, raiding us one wave after another. The duels of Heroic Spirits, vivid like screenshots, made us almost forget to breathe. Numerous characters passed away one after another.

The first three volumes were just a warm-up. Urobuchi Gen's ability was finally displayed in all its magnificence in volume four. As you have already experienced, though your heart struggled helplessly under a heavy weight, your hand couldn't help but keep turning pages to read more of the hellish cycle within.

And yet where did this relief and satisfaction come from? Though sorrow lingered within our hearts, not a hint of regret is produced.

A story in which a man failed his great aspiration also has a reason to exist. That is to show us a strength capable of summoning miracles from the abyss of despair. This strength, which connects the stories that come after it, had been deeply carved into my heart.

With the 4th volume, "Fate/zero" can no longer be called a side story, but a story that truly connects with canon. Different though their forms of expression may be, if they can support and complement each other then "zero" is no longer 0, but could even surpass the fully-developed '1'.

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Let me say one more thing. "Fate/zero" occurred ten years before the PC game "Fate/stay night", describing how a hero of justice began his march.

This is a tale that had 'justice', this extremely preposterous 'lip-service' word, as its main plotline. It was truly a tiresome and unrefined story, and Urobuchi Gen made a visual feast out of it.

As a novel, Zero.

As a visual novel, Stay Night.

Two very different forms and styles, and even the authors of the scripts differ.

The original author and the author of this book, Urobuchi Gen.

There are a few similarities in interest between them, but deep inside the differences are rather great: style, ideas, areas of expertise; vegetarianism vs. loving meat, sleep time, and even the preference for girls! Ah, no, the last three had nothing to do with this Commentary. No, really.

“Zero”, written by Urobuchi Gen, was naturally very different from “stay night” in terms of style.

However, the essences of both are surprisingly similar.

At the time of zero's publication, most readers were probably filled with anxiety and expectation. Because Urobuchi Gen is an excellent writer, there was always the possibility that he would strike cacophonic chords when he borrowed the world view of another.

But as you can see, although the instruments in this performance differed from each other, the pitches of the two worked together in perfect harmony, and a wonderful ensemble was performed.

Here, I want to thank the fact that such a famous performer could come and play the music of “fate”, and also hope that you enjoyed this miraculous creation. Although I shouldn’t express gratitude as the commentator, I would like to take this opportunity to express my utmost gratitude toward Urobuchi Gen.

And I am glad that I’ve dispelled, if only a little, the anguish in Urobuchi Gen’s heart.

“I can’t immerse myself in work,” Urobuchi Gen often told me.

According to him, that was the reason why he couldn’t successfully keep creating pieces. In my opinion, however, all of this came about because of his unusual ability to calmly and thoroughly analyze and observe literature.

If, for example, I am a diver immersed in the story, then he would be the all-seeing nautical analyst on the water's surface testing the depths. His powers of understanding and analysis would undoubtedly overshadow me, who only knew how to dive beneath the water.

“What is re-creation?”

In recent years, Urobuchi Gen has often talked about this concern of his.

I respectfully call him older brother, but have often unceremoniously ordered him to do this and that. In my opinion, however, compared to me, he has a particular innocence.

Something happened a while ago.

During a press conference to create a cross-media adaptation, Urobuchi Gen had answered:

“~ Then again, is it really a good thing to adapt the story, which you wrote after so much work, into an anime or a game? You would only have shown it to the world after you believed it was complete. I hope you consider what would happen if you changed the media. It can only become ‘something completely different’, moving further and further away from its original, complete form. I hope you will realize that. ~”

There are a number of “original authors” who, though faintly aware of its wrongness, still bow at the feet of the so-called “joy of expansion.” Even if their hearts are suspicious, when they are faced with their joy and personal modesty, such suspicion seems so insignificant. For this reason, we swallow back our questions.

Urobuchi Gen is purely virtuous, pure enough to detect the fact that “it will be moving further and further away from its original, complete form.” This is almost similar to the virtue of a samurai.

And because of this, he would have the so-called “Re-creation Stress.”

Urobuchi Gen also said this:

“Commercial re-creation isn’t good. A non-commercial re-creation is good~”

Exactly. In writing “Fate/zero”, he didn't have even the slightest intention of going commercial, and only wanted to write “his ideal Fate”. That innocent wish was not stained with anything unnecessary or any factors that placated modern trends. Of course, he himself understands better than anyone else that his own way of life is incompatible with modern society.

Would the reader approve of his own particular moral values –?

Fortunately, “Fate” is a critically acclaimed work. It is the support of many readers that helped guide Urobuchi Gen and “his beloved Fate" onto the right path.

No, it should be said that he never went astray.

It was perhaps inevitable that “Fate/zero” became a saga of blood and tears, describing Emiya Kiritsugu’s progress in blood.

Many people were aware of their own hypocrisy and planned to stop writing thus.

Even more people believed in their love of the original, and so chose to continue writing.

I only hope to add a little more value to the story.

Even if he himself did not succeed in the end, the heir to his aspiration will one day appear –

It is easily said, but Nasu Kinoko couldn't help but feel sad in his heart when he realized that the times when Urobuchi Gen would casually say at 1am, “How does this sound?” and then recount a series of unexpected plots was coming to an end.

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フェイト／ゼロ

4

「煉獄の炎」

虚淵玄（ニトロプラス）

TYPE-MOON BOOKS
ウA−04

TYPE-MOON BOOKS
定価：本体1400円(税込)

己の迷いに終止符を打つため、いよいよ自らの戦いを開始する言峰綺礼。周到なるその策略は、瞬く間に聖杯戦争の趨勢を塗り替え、誰もが予期しなかった展開へと導いていく。見えざる手に翻弄されるがまま、男たちは、女たちは、信念のため、野望のため、或いは守るべき誰かのために、凄絶に命を散らしていく。
綺礼の暗躍を察知した衛宮切嗣は、相手がもはや決して避けられざる宿敵であることを了解し、覚悟を決めて、その待ち受ける罠に敢然と挑みかかっていく。そして運命の導きは、二人の男を対決の場に集わせる。
激突する三人の王。その真名を解き放ち咆吼するバーサーカー。残る全てのサーヴァントが覇を競う熾烈なる最終決戦の最中、ついに業火とともに降臨する聖杯。秘め隠されてきたその正体が、今、白日の下に晒される……
やがて一人の少年が、運命に出会うその日に向けて——過ぎ去りし日々の物語は、今、語り継がれた惨劇の真相へと辿り着く。『Fate/stay night外伝』ここに堂々の完結！